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All his world's a stage

Hall grad has impressive Broadway career

See story on page 14

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QUOTE OF NOTE:

"Our parish-based retreats are what we do the best … That is our mission. That's our ministry."

– Fr. David Cinquegrani

See story page 16

ON THE COVER

"The Phantom of the Opera" has been a constant presence in the life of Seth Sklar-Heyn who graduated from Hall High School in 1999.

Photo by Matthew Murphy
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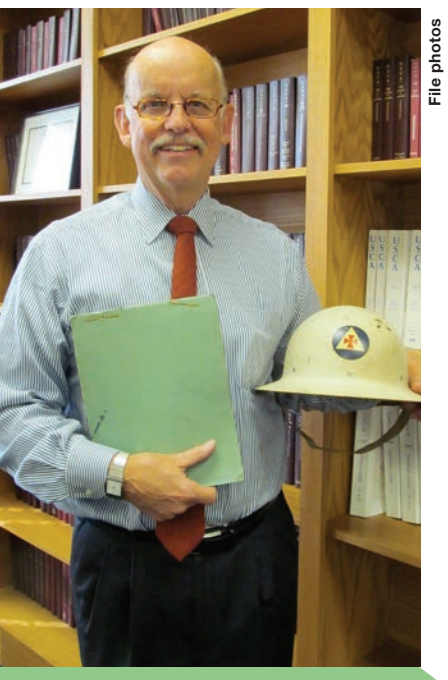
Luck and leadership

Retiring town manager says he's been fortunate to spend three decades in service to West Hartford

by Abigail Albair
Executive Editor

Town Manager Ron Van Winkle is pictured above at the annual Morley School Red Wagon Brigade unloading donations for the food pantry. A lover of history Van Winkle enjoyed some of the town's 2014 historic acquisitions (right), including a World War II era air raid helmet and a 1942 manual for air raid wardens that was developed by the town. After nearly three decades, Van Winkle will retire this summer.



File photos

Town Manager Ron Van Winkle took up his post in 2008, during the economic crisis.

The man and the time were a perfect match.

That is how former Mayor Scott Slifka describes it, recalling how Van Winkle quickly led the town through that time to continued prosperity.

"When he came to us [as town manager] he was the preeminent economist in Greater Hartford and had been for a generation, applying that macro knowledge to very hyper-local events. He had been leading development in West Hartford for a long time and came to us in the midst of financial crisis," Slifka said. "He helped us make some very decisive, immediate decisions to weather the storm relatively unscathed and then very quickly pivot back to being the most vibrant town in the region."

The decisions Van Winkle helped the town make in all veins – not just economic – were powerful and forward thinking, Slifka said, musing that, perhaps, that is because his lifelong residency had an impact on how he wanted to help shape the town.

"He could translate [his experience as a resident] into how a decision was going to impact a specific neighborhood, or a specific business district, or a school."

Van Winkle was born at 10 Ridgebrook Drive in 1947. He will turn 70 this year.

"I grew up here," the town manager, who will retire July 1 after three decades of service to the West Hartford community, recalled on the afternoon of Election Day as he sat in his office glancing out the window at the residents poll standing, discussing what the future might look like after the results were counted. "My parents bought their house in 1938. They paid $3,900 for it."

Van Winkle left town for school, earning an undergraduate degree before being drafted into the military as a computer programmer. While waiting to board a plane to VietNam, Van Winkle learned all computer programmers were being pulled out and he would not serve in country. He was instead sent to Germany where he worked as an office manager in non-combat service.

When he returned home, he continued graduate school at Northeastern and worked toward a Ph.D. at Boston College, ultimately completing all but his dissertation and taking a job at UTC building econometric models for Pratt & Whitney.

Van Winkle next took a position as the commissioner of Economic Development for the state of Connecticut under Gov. Ella Grasso for two years and then went into c onsulting work, including consulting for the town, as the sole proprietor of his own business.

When West Hartford's town manager at the time, Barry Feldman, offered Van Winkle the position of the town's director of Community Services, the timing was right as Van Winkle's wife, Ruth, was pregnant with his second son and wanted him around more for his children.

Although he said the job "is not for the faint-hearted" and 12-hour days are not uncommon, he was happy to be working and living in the same place.

"I never envisioned I'd end up back in my hometown," Van Winkle said. "Even when I took the job, I never imagined I'd be here 30 years. One reason I'm here 30 years later is this is a great town to work for."

Decades of change

Van Winkle was hired to lead the department of Community Services in 1987 and tasked with helping to build the town's economic development strategy.

"I've always been lucky in my life to find the right opportunities. West Hartford really stands out from all the other communities. All the seeds we've planted are going to blossom over the next few years. … This town is in a good place with or without me. I'm really lucky to be here and have had this opportunity to be town manager."

–Town Manager Ron Van Winkle

New restaurants were not allowed in the Center, outdoor dining was not permitted and much of the town's commercial areas were lackluster.

"Today we are the center of the region," he said. "If you want to go out to dinner, West Hartford is the place to go."

Van Winkle's department was in charge of construction, be it buildings or roadways, and he has fond memories of all he oversaw in that time as the town began to thrive and new development was continually attracted to town.

"We spent more than $100 million in school renovations over the years. And private development: West Hartford all of a sudden became this place where people wanted to be, wanted to bring their business and wanted to open new retail stores," he recalled. "If we had another 100 acres of land [for development] we'd be going gangbusters."

Blue Back is at the top of the list of accomplishments of which Van Winkle is most proud, he said, recalling the late '80s as a time when "you could virtually lay down in Farmington Avenue at 5 p.m. and wouldn't get hit by a car."

The change didn't happen overnight, but, as an economist, Van Winkle said he knew it was possible from the beginning, and he is proud the evolution was carried out without tax abatements or use of eminent domain, but rather by ground work to create an environment where people could invest and earn a return on that investment without the need for subsidies.

"It didn't seem to me to be a huge problem, to tell you the truth," Van Winkle said. "I always used to say if you have a 401k, you need to invest to make a return. We just needed to attrat that investment here by strengthening the local market. We met with landlords in West Hartford Center every month to talk about what was going on and met with retail merchants to get them to think about attracting new business. We tried to just get everybody moving in the same direction."

Businesses are open later now and the town's commercial districts are thriving, though that is just one aspect of what Van Winkle looks back on as a success of his tenure.

The process to streamline town and Board of Education operations began with Van Winkle's Community Services department taking over construction for the schools in addition to the town, and was completed five years ago when the Information Technology department was merged.

Each year since Van Winkle became town manager the town has run a surplus, even through tough times such as after the winter storm in October of 2011 hit.

Above all else, Van Winkle said he is proud of the team he has built, one that he believes will continue a legacy of excellence after his retirement is official.

He himself was part of a "strategic team of people" assembled by Feldman, he said, and in the last half decade nearly every department head has retired and been replaced by a new leader hired by Van Winkle.

"West Hartford is really lucky for the team we attract to work here. My team of directors, all of two who were hired by me, all do a wonderful job and care about this town. There are no silos. That has been, for me, a great success that I've been able to replace those who have retired and replace them with people who, with or without me, will make this town a success," he said.

Looking ahead

As the search for Van Winkle's replacement is ongoing, one which he said will take at least four months, he will be working on the next fiscal year budget, endeavoring to leave the town in the best place possible in the

See MANAGER on page 44

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LIFE *in the classroom*

Chinese added as an option for middle school students

by Alicia B. Smith
Associate Editor

Photo by Alicia B. Smith

Zhengjie Guo was born in Beijing, China, and now teachers Chinese at King Philip and Bristow Middle Schools.

Students thrust their right hands out in front of them before snapping them back to the side of their bodies. In unison, the students chanted words, each with its own choreographed move.

Zhengjie Guo was helping her sixth-grade class learn to count in Mandarin Chinese.

For the first time in West Hartford Public Schools, sixth graders have the option of taking Chinese as a foreign language. It has been taught in the high schools for the past 10 years.

One hundred and ten students signed up at the middle school level to learn Chinese and the district hired two teachers, Guo and Jing Jing,

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who travel among the three middle schools, providing instruction.

One morning at King Philip Middle School, students in Guo's class were focused on the calendar, and learning how to say the days of the week and counting as they make their way from one to 100. They also practiced some basic words and phrases to use when first being introduced to someone.

At one point, students got up from their desks and took a number of different poses as they talked to their partners. Kayla Resnisky and Sophia De Luca practiced a yoga pose while they reviewed material. Sal Katz and C.J. Bukowski turned sideways and bent over backwards in their seats.

Guo later explained that the physicality of her class relates to Total Physical Response, or TPR, a teaching method for learning language that helps student's associate vocabulary with physical movement.

Throughout the entire class, Guo spoke only Chinese and her students, with about eight weeks of classes, were proficient enough to follow along.

Megan Zingle, world language department supervisor, said that local students typically start Spanish lessons in the third grade, with the exception of Norfeldt School, which teaches French instead. Prior to this year, sixth-graders could only choose Spanish or French.

"Chinese is the up-and-coming language. Culturally, in the United States, it's one of the fastest-growing programs we see."

–Megan Zingle

"Chinese is the up-and-coming language," Zingle said. "Culturally, in the United States, it's one of the fastest-growing programs we see."

With more emphasis on a global market, travel and communication, she said Chinese has become one of the most popular languages for students to learn.

"As they move forward, not only does it give them better opportunities with job searches, it opens their eyes to culture and people they may never get to experience in the community they live in," she said.

"Many have not had the opportunity to experience speaking with someone who does not speak English."

Zingle said she was in awe at how much the students have learned in just two months.

"It's a testament to the teachers we have here," she said.

In every foreign language classroom Zingle said the teachers do not speak English.

"It's incredible," she said.

At a Board of Education meeting, several students in the Chinese classes shared some of what they had learned, an experience that earned high praise from the board members.

"We will build the program to seventh grade next year and then eighth grade with the hope that they will continue in high school," Zingle said.

Each student who takes a foreign language is asked to commit to three years of study in their language of choice.

Zingle, a former Spanish teacher, said she has taken it upon herself to learn some Chinese.

"I am learning slowly," she said. "It's so different from English, so different from Spanish."

The difference is in the pronunciation of words as well as the grammatical structure.

In preparation for the first classes, the middle school Chinese teachers spent the summer writing

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a curriculum with assistance from the teachers at the high school.

"It really has been a pleasure to watch," Zingle said. "All the teachers in West Hartford are hard working, but to watch these two teachers build a program, they have risen to that challenge."

Sal Katz came to King Philip Middle School from a private school and decided he wanted to challenge himself with a new language.

"I like it," Sal said.

Having studied Hebrew, he said he was up for the challenge of learning a new alphabet.

Explaining why he chose it, C.J. Bukowski said, "Twenty percent of the world is Chinese, that's a lot. A lot of people in the technology and business fields are Chinese. It's important to know."

Omar Bhatti said he has experience learning new languages as he has family members who speak Spanish and Arabic, and he has learned a bit of those languages from them.

"I want to go into technological advancements," Omar said, adding that he would also like to visit China.

Kayla Resnisky also wanted to break from the more traditional French and Spanish.

"I wanted to be part of something bigger," she said.

"I just thought it would be really interesting," Kate Harker said. Among the many interesting components of Chinese she has learned is how when writing, each stroke of a character is done in a certain sequence.

Her brother takes Chinese at Hall High School and she hopes to one day visit China and wanted to get a head start on learning the language.

"It's also really fun. We do activities," Kate said. "She makes it really fun," she said her teacher, Guo.

"I think West Hartford students are fantastic," Guo said. "They love to learn; they drive themselves. They connect with their own life."

Guo said, too, that the community – both parents and those in the schools where she teaches – have been very supportive of the new program.

Photo by Alicia B. Smith

Sophia De Luca and Kayla Resnisky do a yoga pose as they practice their Chinese. The pose helps them remember the new language they are learning.

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Parents were interested in having their sons and daughters learn Chinese and have been helping out in the classroom. Several parents volunteered as chaperones to a trip the Chinese classes took to Central Connecticut State University to celebrate Confucius Day on September 29, the philosopher's birthday.

Guo has a daily routine she observes with her students to help them learn the new language, especially as she is reluctant to use any English.

After she greets her students, she typically goes over their homework and goes through vocabulary relating to the calendar, including days of the week and numbers.

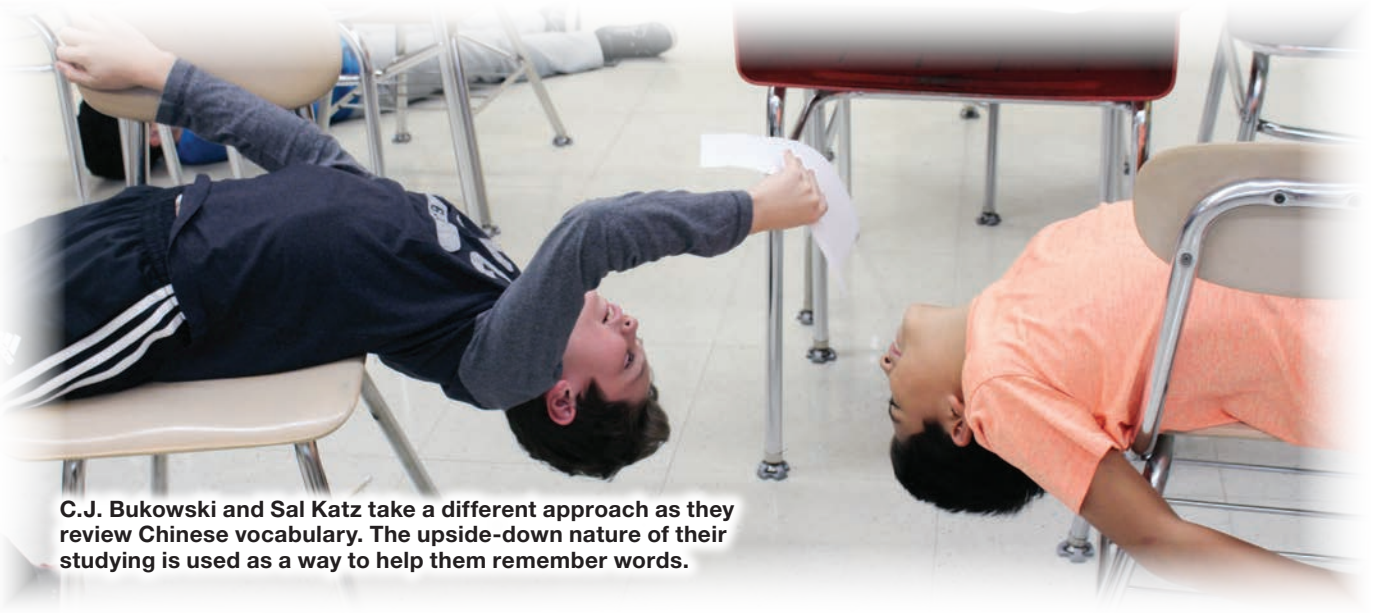
As students progress through the school year they will be learning more about speaking about themselves and how old they are as well as how to talk about their nationality and food.

The program has novice, intermediate and advanced levels and the goal is for the sixth grade students to become proficient in the middle range of the novice category.

"We want them to be able to communicate," Zingle said. "With Chinese being new we can use them as a model."

Guo said that she wants her students to be able to write some and read a bit as well.

"In the long run, we hope they go to Hall or Conard and take AP [Chinese]," and that it will benefit their lives, she said. **WHL**



C.J. Bukowski and Sal Katz take a different approach as they review Chinese vocabulary. The upside-down nature of their studying is used as a way to help them remember words.

Zhengjie Guo goes through a series of moves that she developed to help her students as they learn to count in Chinese.

Photos by Alicia B. Smith

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Courtesy photo

Healing Meals youth volunteers chop vegetables.

Meals that heal

Volunteers help families going through a health crisis

by Sloan Brewster
Staff Writer

Food is medicine.

Volunteers from the Healing Meals Community Project can often be heard saying the phrase, almost as a mantra.

Executive Director Sarah Leathers strongly believes it. She can tell anecdotes about folks who were ill getting unexpectedly better after doing nothing more than changing what they ate.

In one such story, a cancer patient completely shocked his doctor when his tests showed such immense improvement.

"What did you do?" Leathers said the doctor kept asking. "What did you do?"

Nothing but change what he ate, was the reply.

The ability of food to help people get well is one principle behind Healing Meals, a nonprofit founded by Leathers that is part of the Ceres Community Project, a larger nonprofit founded by her sister, Catheryn Couch, in Sonoma County, California in 2007.

"The premise of what we do is we cook 100 percent organic food for families going through a health

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Stacks of meals await delivery to Healing Meals clients.

crisis and our chefs are youth volunteers," Leathers said. "They are truly an amazing group of young people."

The young chefs learn about the benefits of eating organic and they get the positive outcomes from helping their community and people in need, she said. It all started when Couch, a chef who owns a catering company, wanted to help a young woman do some community service.

The girl's mother asked Couch to teach her daughter to cook so she could make some meals for someone in need. She did and the girl, with a friend, made the food for a woman with cancer.

The Ceres Community Project was born from the idea.

"They now have five kitchens in Sonoma County," Leathers said. "We are the ninth in the country."

Ever since Couch began Ceres, Leathers has wanted to open her own branch. Healing Meals is the fulfillment of that dream.

As children, they were always around delicious, well cooked foods

Karen Carew, a Healing Meals mentor, works in the kitchen.

and three out of the five siblings grew up to become health and wellness coaches, Leathers said.

"We were raised in a family where my mom was a fabulous cook," she said. "So my mom always experimented with food, so we grew up in a house where food was about caring for somebody."

Last November, Leathers and a team of partners, all volunteers – Ellen Palmer, Emily Safino and Ellen Hollister – traveled to California and trained with Couch and her own team. When they returned in December, they began fundraising, putting together the rest of the team and setting up the foundations for the nonprofit.

Finding a kitchen to prepare the food took the longest, but when Kim Morrison, New England Pasta Company owner, learned about the need, she offered up her Avon Cafe.

"They said, 'We're a little frustrated,'" Morrison recalled.

They had an idea for a possible kitchen they could use but, on a whim, she said she offered hers if the other opportunity didn't pan out.

"This is a perfect match and it made me happy to see them use that kitchen," Morrison said. "Seriously, I get a lump in my throat to see those kids stand in that kitchen."

Morrison said she loves listening to the young people step out of their comfort zone and talk about what they were doing, including about the health benefits of the meals.

Elaine Titus, a Healing Meals volunteer and a health coach, chimed in about the health benefits, pointing out the transformative attributes of a bone broth they make for the clients, saying that it can help with allergies and general malaise.

When you transform your diet, you do wonders to your health, she said.

"Food is medicine," Leathers said.

The young volunteers do more than cook and learn about healing through food.

"They take this initiative," Leathers said. "I never, at the end of the day, am asking about cleaning up. It just gets done."

The volunteers have been bonding.

"You don't want to miss out on it. When I'm not here on those nights, I hate it," Leathers said. "The kids love it and the parents are constantly telling us that it has been life changing for their child."

She said when she asked one young volunteer why she keeps returning week after week, the girl replied, "I love the way my heart feels when I leave."

Every week when they get together, volunteers begin by thinking about the night ahead.

"We just take a moment," Leathers said. "We stand in a circle and hold hands and take some deep breaths and we just kind of stop our crazy day to think why are we doing this and who are we doing this for."

Leathers then randomly hands out all the names of the clients.

"We just take a moment [remembering] that we're here for these people and everything we do in this kitchen we should just do with love and kindness and care," she said.

Volunteers then read the names on the slips of paper.

"It just brings to light that these are people with struggles," Leathers said.

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The volunteers also write cards to the clients each week.

Kim Green, of West Hartford, a Stage 4 cancer survivor and former Healing Meals client, kept those cards and remembered how folks from the project would stop by to check on her and to see how she felt.

The notes of encouragement they wrote were touching, Green said.

Sometimes there is a special treat to bring along with the meals, such as when a local florist called and offered some extra flowers.

"That was such a beautiful gesture to think of us in that way," Leathers said.

One young girl heard about Healing Meals and asked for extra chores. She then donated all the money she made to the project. Another time, a young man raised money for Healing Meals for his bar mitzvah project, Leathers said.

Those touches added to the experience for Green, who noted how seamlessly it all worked together.

"It was just really a remarkable start to finish to see how many people are giving of their time," she said. "It really is a remarkable operation."

Healing Meals has a team of 70 volunteers, 39 of whom are youth. They have prepared 2,900 meals for 23 families in Avon, Simsbury, Canton, West Hartford, Glastonbury, Torrington, Bristol and Wethersfield.

"We just finished our 22nd week cooking," Leathers said.

Every Saturday night from 4-7 p.m., volunteers gather in the kitchen at New England Pasta Company.

"This week we're cooking for 30 people," Leathers said.

The menu – a week's worth of meals – included Caribbean chicken stew, baked salmon with Dijon mustard and tarragon, fresh corn and zucchini chowder, mushroom leak frittata, quinoa tabouli, and an immune broth just for the ill client, made with vegetables and herbs, including astragalus root, reishi mushrooms, codonopsis root and juniper berries.

Leathers was also thinking about adding breakfast oat zucchini cookies to the menu.

"We use very little sugar in our cooking," Leathers said, adding that they rarely make dessert.

Fresh produce is donated to the project by Holcomb Farm in Granby through a half share in its Community Supported Agriculture.

Leathers prepares the menus after she sees what's in a given week's batch.

Fresh soup is one of the menu items Healing Meals prepares for clients experiencing health crises.

The meals are delivered by Delivery Angels.

"Everybody in the family gets meals for free," Leathers said.

"Through the spring and into early summer I received their meals," Green said. "Every Sunday a delivery volunteer would show up and line my counters and my fridge with the most delightful food ever."

Green concurred with the belief in the healing power of food, and said her recovery was much faster than anticipated because she ate the healthy organic meals leading up to and after surgery.

"My immune system just needed to be in impeccable shape," she said, adding that the fresh fruit and veggies and all the protein she received did the trick. "If I wasn't an ill person I felt I could have run a marathon. ... Here I am four months later, I'm opening my own business, I was supposed to be in recovery mode right now."

Green held a grand opening celebration at her new meditation studio, Mindfulness and Matters, at 485 New Park Avenue on October 1.

So far, all Healing Meals clients have come by referrals from people getting the service and telling others about it, but Leathers is looking to find even more.

"We have reached out to local social workers and to the Helen and Harry Gray Cancer Center," she said.

Healing Meals also has gardens at Flamig Farm in Simsbury. In the six raised beds, they grow kale, mint, parsley, peppers, lettuce and - until a critter got to them - tomatoes.

"It's been great, a great learning process for us," Leathers said.

Next year, the hope is that a team of young people will claim the space at Flamig, making the decision what to grow and tending the gardens. **WHL**

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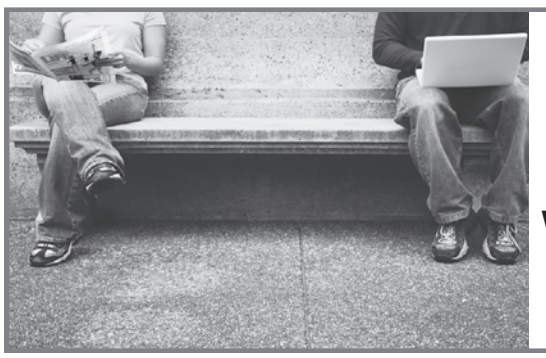

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"I think, personally, I like theater because you can't control it. It will never be the same. To the untrained eye it might look the same night after night, but when you know, all you can see are the differences."

–Seth Sklar-Heyn

Photo by Matthew Murphy

For Hall grad, theater is a lifestyle

by Lynn Woike
Editor

Seth Sklar-Heyn is the production supervisor of "The Phantom of the Opera" on Broadway, the executive producer and associate director of Phantom's nationally touring show, the executive producer of the 2014 Broadway revival of "Les Misérables," and the executive producer and associate director of the 2017 revival of "Miss Saigon."

He works for Cameron Mackintosh, who The New York Times called "the most successful, influential and powerful theatrical producer in the world."

Mackintosh has produced more musicals than anyone else, including the three longest-running musicals of all time, "Les Misérables," "The Phantom of the Opera" and "Cats." Over the next three years he has more than 30 new productions of his musicals scheduled to open around the world.

"I look after and represent him on all his productions in North America," Sklar-Heyn said. "My job is to keep tabs on all the little details."

It all started at Hall High School with a paper with "a terrible title" he wrote for his Advanced Placement U.S. History class with Liz Devine: "A Historical Analysis of African-Americans on Broadway after the Civil War Reconstruction."

"I was desperate to find any excuse to bring Broadway into the assignment … and what that paper allowed me was the opportunity to

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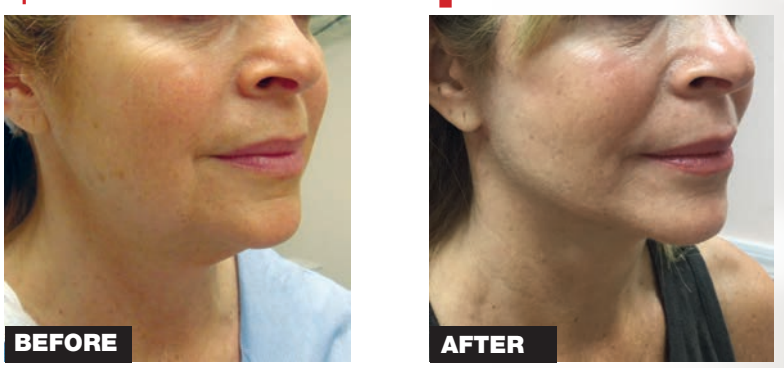

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interview performers and professionals working on the Broadway revival of 'Showboat' and the first Broadway production of 'Ragtime.'

"Long story short, I wrote that paper in my junior year of high school. I met people who I stayed in touch with. During my freshman year [at Vassar] college, they called and said, 'Do you want to come and get lunch for these people?'"

He explained that when you come into a company with no skills and no credits, you can be a production assistant – like an intern – to the stage manager.

He accepted the offer.

"It was a great job," he said, calling the experience better and cheaper than grad school.

"It was through stage management that I met designers and it was through designers that I met directors. So where people go to school for this, I went to work. Every job I had was another class, essentially."

It was during his third job that the stars aligned.

The summer of 2000, between his freshman and sophomore year, Sklar-Heyn was living in a youth hostel in Boston, supported by his mother, working as an unpaid production assistant for "Seussical the Musical" before it went to Broadway. During tech week, a stage manager had a death in the family and had to leave the show. Sklar-Heyn was given his Equity card and a headset and became an assistant stage manager for the first three weeks of the show.

He returned to New York City, union card in hand, and began learning Phantom from its three stage managers, including Craig Jacobs who ran the show and who had encouraged Sklar-Heyn to go to Boston in the first place.

"They brought me in and said, 'This is how it works.' They taught me how everything operated back stage. … It was a big deal because I was a kid. I had never done stage management at any level. I had never stage managed any production – high school, college, nothing."

He was 19 when he started calling "The Phantom of the Opera" on Broadway.

Leaving Phantom in the early 2000s, Sklar-Heyn took various positions on many shows, adjusting his career path along the way.

"Luckily, I've been on a lot of shows that haven't been successful. That's the key to getting a lot of credits," he said. Quoting the old adage, "You learn more from a flop than you do from a hit," he said, "I worked on a bunch of flops." Yet they all provided an opportunity or a lesson. "Each one led to the next project, so for me there were no flops."

In 2011, Sklar-Heyn got a call from the man who had supervised Phantom for 18 years on Broadway and on U.S. tours, Peter von Mayrhauser.

"I'd worked with him a few times in the past as a stage manager. He knew I'd move into directing. He told me, 'I'm retiring and I think you should take over.'"

Von Mayrhauser introduced him to Mackintosh who interviewed him and presented him to Harold Prince, the producer and director of the best-known Broadway musicals for the last half century and winner of 21 Tony Awards – more than any other individual.

Sklar-Heyn got the job of supervising "The Phantom of the Opera" on Broadway, working with Prince on the creative aspects and with Mackintosh as an executive producer for the production.

Returning to Majestic Theatre, he was reunited with some of the same people who had first taught him the ropes.

"I think, personally, I like theater because you can't control it. It will never be the same. To the untrained eye it might look the same night after night, but when you know, all you can see are the differences," he said.

In May 2012, just prior to the 25th anniversary of the show, he took it over as production supervisor. The success of the anniversary gala he helped to plan at the New York Public Library then led to other opportunities with Mackintosh's company.

He is based in New York City.

"I try to visit the show every few weeks, to see how it is going and check with the show's resident director, who travels with the company, to make sure everything is as it should be."

When this interview was conducted by phone in late October, he was in Fort Worth with the tour, working with the new company members and fine-tuning other aspects of the show. It was his sixth time zone in two weeks as he added to his 315,000 airline miles.

"I get to be the audience member that has an opinion," Sklar-Heyn said. "He's doing me doing the Phantom, but with much more skill and presence and a greater technique than I have."

Learning to watch the show as an audience member who is seeing it for the first time is a skill he aims to master.

"I will head home this weekend but be back out here in another few weeks when the production is playing another city. I like to be back to the tour every five weeks if I can be. Sometimes more visits are called for."

When he is in the city, he tries to see Phantom once or twice a week, attending potential rehearsals as well.

"Half of my role at Phantom focuses on everything onstage, the other half focuses on how the stage event can be supported outside the doors of the Majestic and what the audience experience will be when they step into the theatre itself," he said.

The rest of his time in the city is spent working on matters relating to upcoming productions including a future national tour of "Les Miserables" and "Miss Saigon," – which he will look after once it opens on Broadway next year.

If Mackintosh asks him to jump, he said he wants to do a backflip.

"The people I've worked with are complete control freaks and I aspire to surpass them," he said with a little laugh.

"I'm pretty much willing to take on any task, any challenge, that comes. I really don't have a job description – it evolves and accommodates anything that should arise."

Not too long ago, Sklar-Heyn met a man who reminded him of himself and is providing him with opportunities.

For those aspiring to a life in theater, he recommends luck, a generous mother and taking advantage of every opportunity you can get.

"I'm very lucky that I've never been out of work since I started," he said.

Courtesy photo

During at a photo shoot onstage at Broadway's Majestic Theatre, Seth Sklar-Heyn adjusts the costume of Julia Udine, who recently played Christine in "The Phantom of the Opera."

"I remember laying on the floor of my room in West Hartford, listening to the two-disk set of 'Miss Saigon,' and now I've spent the last year casting the Broadway revival and I'll start rehearing that in January. So I do have to have moments when I look back and think of the trajectory and acknowledge (a) it was lucky and (b) I worked really hard."

"I loved growing up in West Hartford," he said, grateful that the arts are supported. "It was a good place to grow up, to have a foundation. … I took full advantage of everything they had to offer. I can still list by name everyone who … supported or guided me toward that first job. … Thank you Liz Devine."

Sklar-Heyn admits his relentless ambition translates into "the willingness to do anything just to get your foot in the door," adding, "I'm still willing to do anything."

Brooklyn is now home, where he lives with his husband, an environmental policy attorney, whom he met in college.

"I like to be home. … I like people to come visit me," he said. "I try to have a pretty low-key existence when I can, but I also love my life in the city, which is anything but low-key, and I would be lying if I said I wanted things to slow down. I love it being full on. I crave the constant stimulation and I can't just hang out for too long.

"It is a lifestyle of sorts – and I probably make it more my life than I have to. Luckily, Jack is more than understanding. He knows who I work with and what I work on and the demands that can arise. He also is able to give me perspective and provide an outsider's view of it all." **WHL**

No retreat

Passionists at Holy Family have not wavered from their mission for 65 years

by Lynn Woike
Editor

Photo by Lynn Woike

Remaining true to its roots while still making accommodations for changing times has kept the Holy Family Passionist Retreat Center thriving since it opened in 1951. The center on Tunxis Road is the largest Passionist ministry in the world and the largest parish-based Catholic retreat center in the United States. Each year, nearly 20,000 people find comfort, healing and rest there.

Its anniversary was officially celebrated September 18 with a mass and a reception attended by nearly 300 people, including four men "who were here during that first year; we call them the class of '51," said Luke Giroux, director of marketing and development.

Building of the men's Catholic retreat house began in the late 1940s; it opened in 1951.

"The Passionists had a retreat house up in Springfield for years and years, and the Catholic men of Connecticut would have to go to Springfield for retreat," Giroux said. "Fr. Joseph Leo Flynn, who was a Passionist, wanted to open a retreat house in Connecticut. So they looked around for property and bought, originally, close to 100 acres."

The first two buildings were a 100-room retreat house in the front, where the main lobby is located, and the monastery in the

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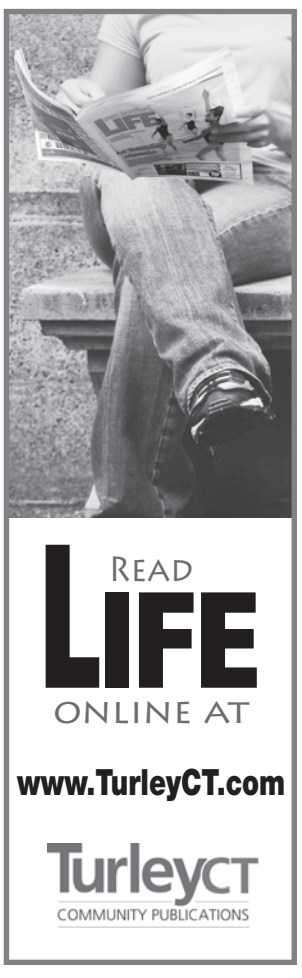

Courtesy photo

The main chapel connects the retreat house and the monastery buildings.

back that was home to more than 40 clergy at one time. The main chapel connects the two buildings.

In the 1960s, a third building opened, in the back to the left, with 70 additional rooms.

Looking at old photos, Fr. David Cinquegrani, retreat director, said, "The building looks the same."

Currently, there are 165 guest rooms. Some have been converted into administrative offices for more than 40 full- and part-time lay staff that has taken on much of the work previously done by members of the clergy, which now number about 10.

"We rely on well over 100 volunteers who staff the front desk, work in the bookstore, in the development office," Giroux said. "We rely

"Our parish-based retreats are what we do the best … That is our mission. That's our ministry."

–Fr. David Cinquegrani

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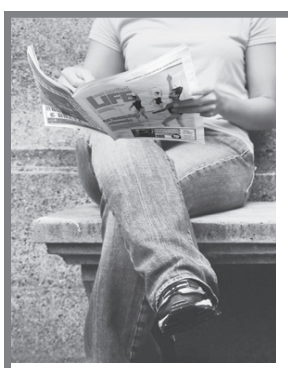

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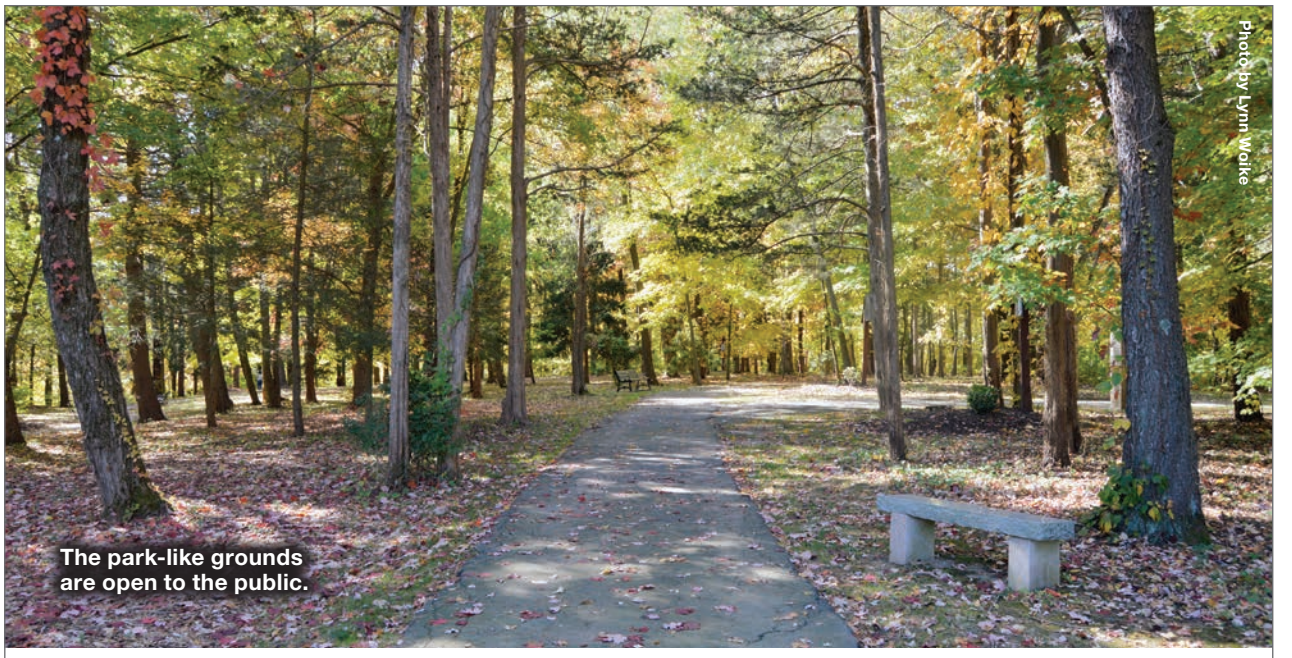

Photo by Lynn Woike

The park-like grounds are open to the public.

Courtesy photo

Fr. Joseph Leo Flynn (at bat) was the founding priest and first retreat director.

Photo by Lynn Woike

Fr. Joseph Leo Flynn is among those buried in the cemetery set behind Stations of the Cross on the center's 48 acres.

on volunteers heavily," he said. "It's nice to have people who want to give of their time and services."

The men's weekend retreats have been held since the center first opened. Arrival is typically late Friday afternoon with a Sunday noon departure. The time includes breakout workshops, prayer services, time for reflection and the sacrament of reconciliation.

"Still those very retreats are happening today," Giroux said.

When the facility opened, there was a men's retreat almost every weekend, drawing about 4,000 each year. The demand was so great, second beds were added to rooms. Now, he said, about half that many men attend.

Recovery retreats also date back to 1951.

"We've been doing AA retreats since the early days. Matt Talbott is an AA organization that adopted us and do their retreats here. Obviously, all are welcome in the program," Giroux said.

Women's retreats were added in 1986. When Cinquegrani became the retreat director in 2002, he added youth confirmation retreats. These take place during the school year, with 75-120 high school students from across the state coming for a one-day program that is a requirement for the sacrament of confirmation.

Photo by Arthur Kiely Jr.

This was one of the men's retreats from 1951, the year the Holy Family Passionist Retreat Center opened.

The Holy Family Passionist Retreat Center on Tunxis Road is the largest Passionist ministry in the world and the largest parish-based Catholic retreat center in the United States.

Photo by Tom Mazzarella

There are retreats for music ministers, parish staff, Catholic school faculty, women religious, knitters, students, and those seeking to notice and respond to promptings of Spirit. A couple's retreat takes place around Valentine's Day.

Retreats run for a day, a weekend, a week or once a week for six weeks.

Holy Family also hosts a number of celebrations around special days such as Thanksgiving, Easter Week and Mother's Day.

The retreat center's main conference room with the latest technology seats more than 200 people while the monastery conference room holds 100. There are two classrooms for 50 people each, a recently renovated main dining room with an outdoor patio seating 275 people and the monastery dining room that can serve 50 people. There are smaller rooms for as few as six people. There are also two chapels – one large and one small.

The facility has 210 beds, 164 of them are in single rooms. Eight rooms have a private bathroom. There are four suites.

All are available to rent for corporate functions, conferences, weddings, family reunions and other events.

The reason Holy Family has reached its 65th year is because it's remained a parish-based retreat center. Most of the retreat houses that gave that up and turned to doing retreats for anyone are now closed, said Fr. Terry Kristofak, who was retreat director for 10 years. He moved on to head of the entire Passionist order, in charge of missions throughout the United States for eight years before becoming back here in retirement where he is still an active member of the team.

Cinquegrani explained that parishes have been "a good organizational source for promoting the retreats."

It's been important to the center's survival.

"That has kept us really alive and functioning," he said. "Our parish-based

Renting space at Holy Family Passionist Retreat Center

Copper Beech Institute

The Copper Beech Institute is an independent, non-sectarian organization that occupies a renovated wing at Holy Family. Dynamic leaders and spiritual teachers from around the globe come to share wisdom and practices to heal, transform and empower participants. Mindfulness is applied to challenging issues through retreats and trainings to create a world of deeper awareness, connection and compassion.

The Golden Thread Gallery

Its name, The Golden Thread, represents the invisible, underlying connection that weaves together the spirit of humanity – through the arts. Established in 2012, the gallery exhibits professional and emerging artists – more than 400 to date – from various backgrounds, and welcomes all mediums, all cultures and all religions. Each year are four exhibits, each with a theme that enhances the mission of the retreats and workshops taking place at Holy Family Passionist Retreat Center.

Spiritual Life Center

Since 1982, the Spiritual Life Center has offered people from different faith traditions and spiritual practices spiritual direction and training. In addition to a variety of programs throughout the year offering mutual support and growth are ongoing spiritual direction, an internship program for those interested in becoming spiritual directors and a formation program for those interested in becoming a supervisor.

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Photo by Lynn Wolke

This grotto honors Our Lady of Lourdes, a veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Photo by Tom Mazzarella

The empty circle in the labyrinth's center is a reminder to be as an empty vessel that you may be filled with love and peace. The labyrinth is accessible by wheelchair and is open daily.

Courtesy photo

Fr. David Cinquegrani has been the retreat director for close to 20 years.

retreats are what we do the best and what we know we need to continue to do. ... At the end of the day, we're a parish-based retreat center. That is our mission. That's our ministry. ... We do that for God."

He acknowledged, "As a nonprofit, we are still a business, so we've tried to augment that with renting the facility for dozens of groups over the course of the year. We recognized in the last eight to 10 years, we've got a beautiful facility ... [and] might as well look for other ways to use it."

Three independent organizations rent space at Holy Family. Each is a 501(c)(3). While their missions align with that of the retreat center, they are separate entities. In 2010, the Spiritual Life Center relocated from Bloomfield. The Golden Thread Gallery opened three years ago, and two years ago, Copper Beech Institute began programming to reach more people – not just the religious-based or Catholics already served by the center. (See sidebar on page 19 for more information.)

Originally about twice its size, the property on Tunxis Road, not far from the Farmington town line, is now 48 acres. Some land was sold and the State of Connecticut took some during the making of "the stacks" on I-84 in Farmington.

"It's still very peaceful and very tranquil," Giroux said.

Following a path into the woods on the right side of the campus leads to a labyrinth. In its center is a circular sculpture created by stonemason Dan Sieracki.

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Paul of the Cross

St. Paul of the Cross was born at Ovada in the Republic of Genoa on January 3, 1694. His infancy and youth were spent in great innocence and piety. He was inspired from on high to found a congregation; in an ecstacy he beheld the habit which he and his companions were to wear. On November 22, 1720, his bishop vested him with the habit that had been shown to him in a vision – the same that the Passionists still wear.

St. Paul built his first monastery near Obitello. Sometime later he established a larger community at the Church of St. John and Paul in Rome. For 50 years, he remained the indefatigable missionary of Italy. God lavished upon him the greatest gifts in the supernatural order, but he treated himself with the greatest rigor, and believed that he was a useless servant and a great sinner.

He died in 1775 at the age of 81. Pope Pius IX canonized him 1867. His feast day is October 20.

Holy Family is a ministry of the Passionist Community founded in Italy by St. Paul of the Cross more than 200 years ago.

From Dublin, Ireland to Sydney, Australia, and from Port au Prince, Haiti to Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea, the Passionists today minister in 59 countries and on five continents, bringing hope and healing to all those they meet.

Passionists serve as preachers, retreat givers, pastors, educators and in many other ministries.

Photo by Lynn Woike

Walking it is a metaphor for life's journey. According to the center's website, "The circle is a symbol of eternity and the fullness of life to which God calls each of us. This empty circle at the labyrinth's center reminds us to empty ourselves so that we might be filled with Christ's peace."

There is a grotto to Our Lady of Lourdes, a fish pond, walking trails, benches for resting and contemplation – all open to the public.

Many of the priests who lived at the retreat house are buried in a small cemetery to the south of the building. A path meandering through a wooded area features Stations of the Cross. Also nestled in the woods is a basketball court used during teen retreats.

The retreat season runs from September to June.

"When I first came here as retreat director [in 1986], they were all Passionists except for [one lay person]. Lay people are now associate retreat directors. That was not so in my early days. So lay persons who are trained in theology and psychology are significant people on the team, and that's a big difference," Kristofak said.

"It's made for richer presentations because there are ordained people and religious sisters and lay people working together and presenting. … That made it richer, because you've got so many wonderful backgrounds we wouldn't have as priests only," he said.

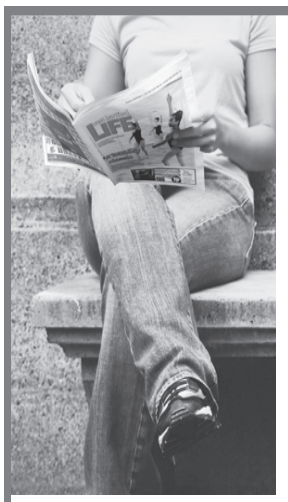
"We give our presentations, and they're always very good, but what happens among the people is the key for me. The dialogue among the men and the women who come here is extremely important to me and that's life-giving."

Growing up around the corner from Holy Family, Kristofak said, "I was waiting on tables over here as a kid. Every high school kid worked here. I washed dishes."

When he came back to the area 20 years later, one of the priests invited him to become a priest, saying, "'Terry, you'd be a good priest.' It's as simple as that," he said of his reason for joining the order.

"Everyone's busy in our world today," Kristofak said, adding that it is "all the more reason to have a retreat center. If you ask people how they are, they'll say busy. So what I say [is it's] all the more reason to take time to do the most important work in life and think about things."

Holy Family's tag line expresses that same sentiment: "Come away and rest awhile." WHL



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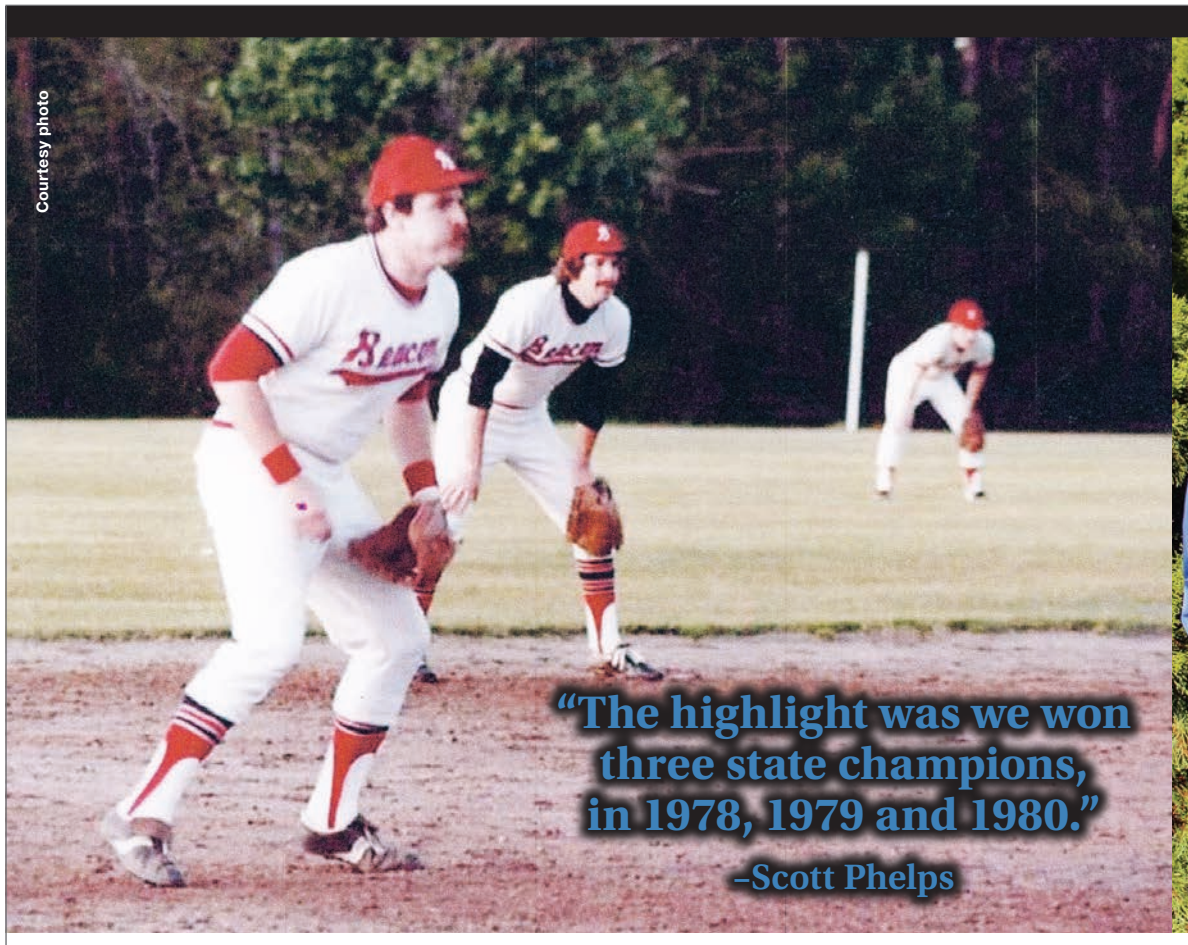

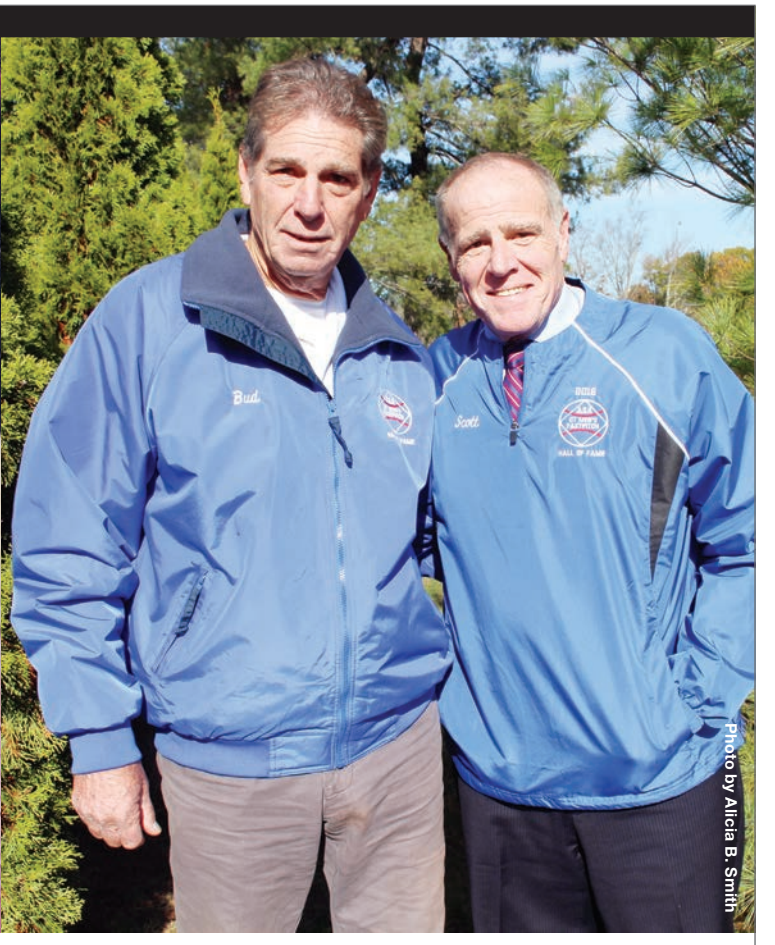

Left: The Phelps brothers, Bud and Scott, were mainstays in the fastpitch softball league. Here they ready themselves for the next play in 1983 when they were members of a team sponsored by the Beacon Café.

Right: Bud and Scott Phelps, who grew up in town and enjoyed years playing fastpitch softball in the West Hartford Fastpitch League, were both inducted into the Amateur Softball Hall of Fame of Connecticut.

Double play

Brothers inducted into Amateur Softball Hall of Fame

by Alicia B. Smith
Associate Editor

The competition was fierce, the fields were hot and the beer was cold back in the day when Bud and Scott Phelps took the field for a no-holds-barred game of fastpitch softball.

Growing up, the two brothers were an integral part of the West Hartford Fastpitch League when summer evenings were spent on the diamonds at Sterling Field and behind King Philip Middle School. Just about every park in town with a diamond had a league team, sponsored by a local restaurant or pub. Fans would bring lawn chairs and watch the action.

Both Bud and Scott were inducted into the Amateur Softball Hall of Fame of Connecticut, in 2015 and 2016 respectively. They are the only brothers to have been selected.

The two grew up on Caya Avenue and graduated from Conard High School, Bud in 1963 and Scott in 1971. Before they actually joined a softball team, the two would often walk to Sterling Field and watch the men play. When they visited the beach as a summer excursion it was likely they would find a pick-up game to join.

Bud played his first game when he visited the park as a spectator; the team was short a player and he was asked to fill the spot.

"In the 1960s, 1970s at Kennedy Park, King Philip, Sterling Field – it was being played all over town," Scott said. "We had players from all over the state."

Part of the appeal of the sport was the fact that the game is played at a quicker pace and the fastpitch adds an element of surprise. It also lent itself to a wide variety of age ranges from teens to those in their 60s.

"It's defense orientated," Scott said. "To be able to play fastpitch you had to have some baseball experience."

"One run was a big thing," Bud added.

At the time the Phelps brothers were playing there were two leagues in the area, the West Hartford Fastpitch League and the Greater Hartford Fastpitch League. Often players were members of each league and would play in games several times a week. The West Hartford league once had 14 teams.

"The highlight was we won three state champions, in 1978, 1979 and 1980," Scott said, adding that they were playing for a team sponsored by the Cypress Arms. Bud played shortstop and his brother was at third base.

The two players had the opportunity to meet baseball legends such as Mickey Mantle, Joe DiMaggio and Casey Stengel, who would tour the country and put on home run exhibitions. Bud has the distinction of tying the record with the Yankees' legend Mickey Mantle.

During their tenure the brothers played on teams that had no paid players although it was not uncommon for other teams to pay their pitchers.

The brothers have both hung up their cleats, Bud retiring from the sport just two years ago. While the mind was willing, the body was not. However, they were not ready to give up the game entirely.

The brothers no longer live in town, having settled by the shore, however, the two get together every month with a number of former players who have also been inducted into the hall of fame.

Comradery was also a large part of the game when the Phelps' boys were playing and many of these friendships forged on the field remain today.

"The sad thing for us is you don't see the fields being used by leagues anymore," Scott said.

These days Bud said slowpitch softball is more common with co-ed teams now enjoying the sport. **WHL**

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Dedicated to making a difference

Dr. Margo Maine was inducted to Connecticut Women's Hall of Fame

by Alicia B. Smith
Associate Editor

Photo by David Hall

Dr. Margo Maine has spent her life working to help and advocating for those with eating disorders. She was recently inducted into the Connecticut Women's Hall of Fame.

It is not discussed much in the media, among doctors, friends or family, and yet more women over the age of 50 will suffer from this disorder than will have breast cancer.

"It took a long time for breast cancer to come out of the closet," Dr. Margo Maine said. "Over the years, with advocacy, breast cancer and other cancers have come out of that shadow. I am hoping the same thing will happen with eating disorders."

From the time she was in graduate school, Maine has dedicated her life to advocating for, educating and treating those suffering from a number of eating disorders. She founded the Maine and Weinstein Specialty Group, has written numerous books on the topic, is a founding member and fellow of the Academy for Eating Disorders, and a member of the founding council and senior board advisor to the National Eating Disorders Association. She is also a member of the psychiatry department at the Institute of Living, and she serves on numerous advisory councils.

She was the recipient of the 2007 Lori Irving Award for Excellence in Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention and in 2015 received a Lifetime Achievement from the National Eating Disorders Association.

In November Maine added one more accomplishment to her already impressive resume. She was inducted into the Connecticut Women's Hall of Fame as a Women's Wellness Honoree. The organization recognizes the accomplishments and contributions Connecticut women have made.

"I was thrilled when I got a call," Maine said, adding that she appreciates that she was honored "at home," as she grew up in Torrington and has lived in West Hartford for about 30 years.

Maine was joined by this year's inductees Rebecca Lobo, Jane Pauley and Dr. Joyce Yerwood along with several other Women's Wellness Honorees in a broad range of fields.

"Women throughout the state are changing history every day, and this year's honorees are doing that by empowering other women to make informed decisions about their own well being," Kathryn Gloor, executive director of the Connecticut Women's Hall of Fame stated in a press release. "Whether they're providing direct care, advocating for better health outcomes, or working to increase public awareness, they are inspiring all of us to advance women's wellness."

The term eating disorder covers a wide range of problems with food. Many people are familiar with extreme manifestations of the disorder – anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa – which Maine said are two of the least frequent diagnosed forms of the disorder. More commonly, men and women suffer from binge eating, which can sometimes be combined with anorexia or bulimia.

"Those cases have just as serious an impact on life and health," Maine said of binge eating-related issues. "There is less research on them, but the research does show it's just as important."

The one thing that eating disorders have in common with one another is that those who suffer from the condition hide their problem from everyone.

"Some may diet right in front of you and then engage in really abusive behaviors with food," Maine said. "You can't tell just by looking at someone with an eating disorder."

The disorders can also be a lifelong struggle for one individual and for someone else, an issue for just a few months or years.

"The good news, treatment does help," Maine said.

Maine did not set out to specialize in treating eating disorders, however circumstances led her here. While in graduate school she was interning at what was then the Newington Children's Hospital and she began to notice more and more young women coming in with eating disorders.

Maine had an interest in gender issues, and the impact on culture and self-esteem and the mind-body connection. She decided to focus her doctorial dissertation on the condition. Part of her research included conducting in-depth interviews with women recovering from anorexia.

When she first came to the field, many of those suffering were upper-middle-class women. These days her patients range across all age and social-economic groups, and include men as well as women.

"We live in a culture with a lot of toxic messages with food and our bodies," Maine said. "It's a food toxic environment; there is something to eat everywhere."

She continued, "The war on obesity does not help. Everyone is convinced they need to lose weight."

When she began her research she was told that eating disorders were just a fad.

Maine said she feels honored to gain the trust of those she is treating. Her goal is for patients to replace the power of the eating disorder with something more positive.

Common misconceptions about eating disorders include the belief they relate to food and weight.

"It's really about deep conflicts," Maine said, adding that self-esteem issues or even trauma can trigger an eating disorder.

Because food is such a huge factor in the lives of so many, it can easily be abused through eating too much or not enough.

Another misconception is that the disorder is often affiliated with younger people, when the reality is that more older women – and men – suffer from the condition.

It is also not true that simply eating more or less food can change the

condition. The reality is that those with serious eating disorders can have long-lasting, damaging physical problems. For younger sufferers it can result in bone loss or organ failure, and older patients find their bodies are not as resilient as they once were.

In addition, the condition manifests itself in men and women differently. Women tend to zero in on numbers – their weight, their dress size – and obsess over calorie counting. For men, the focus tends to be on their physical appearance: do they have a masculine shape with six-pack abs and broad shoulders? It can also be more difficult for men to admit they have an eating disorder.

The issue is also more prevalent than one might think. Maine said that there are those suffering with an eating disorder on every continent regardless of cultural background.

She believes there is more awareness about eating disorders now than in the past, but the one constant is the shame sufferers have about their condition. Some of her clients also suffer with substance abuse issues along with an eating disorder, and are more likely to discuss their substance abuse than their relationship with food.

"Eating is such an integral part of life. If you are not managing it well people will judge you," Maine said.

Another issue is how the insurance companies handle mental health issues; many still do not cover treatment or they may cover in-patient but not out-patient services.

Slowly things are changing and more awareness has developed of late around body issues with such things as an increased use of plus-size models, which helps to show women of all shapes and sizes.

"We live in a culture with a lot of toxic messages with food and our bodies."

–Dr. Margo Maine

There is still work to be done.

Maine explained that the average American women is 5 foot 4 inches tall and weighs 162 pounds while the average model is 5 foot 10 inches tall and weighs 107 pounds.

"The gap between the real and ideal is still pretty substantial," she said.

"Women in average bodies don't feel entitled to take up much space," Maine said. It becomes a Catch-22 for many women who get one message to take advantage of every opportunity professionally or athletically while at the same time are being "told" to take up less space.

These pressures are not exclusive to women. Men face their own challenges, especially when they reach middle age and feel the need to look fit.

"There is more pressure on men than before. They do see it and it's tied to their economic well-being," Maine said.

For those who may need help or know of someone who could benefit from getting help for an eating disorder, Maine said there are resources available.

A place to start would be the National Eating Disorders Association website, www.nationaleatingdisorder.org, which serves as a clearinghouse with information for parents, teachers and medical professional. It has information on signs and symptoms to watch for. There is also a toll-free number to get more assistance.

Maine herself is a founder of the association.

"An eating disorder, like any disorder, is a family illness," Maine said.

People can also seek help from their medical care provider who can refer them to a practice like Maine's or to other treatment options.

An integral part of treatment may be how the patient's family responds. Maine said it is not uncommon to have inter-generational family members with poor body images. Often too, the focus tends to be on the mother-daughter relationship, however, fathers play an important role.

"Fathers are an important part of the equation," she said. "I don't think fathers realize how important they are." **WHL**

The Connecticut Women's Hall of Fame is located in Schwartz Hall on the campus of Southern Connecticut State University, 320 Fitch Street, New Haven. Guests can take a virtual tour of the hall at www.swhf.org.

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Make an impression

Hand and footprints of a loved one, even of the four-legged kind, are a fun project and a great gift for grandparents. The imprints can be made in a small or large plaque, or as an ornament and they can be kept outside too, perhaps as a garden accessory. Appointments are necessary. Come make an impression at the Claypen, the paint your own pottery store, 997 Farmington Avenue. Visit www.theclaypen.com or call 860-233-3322.

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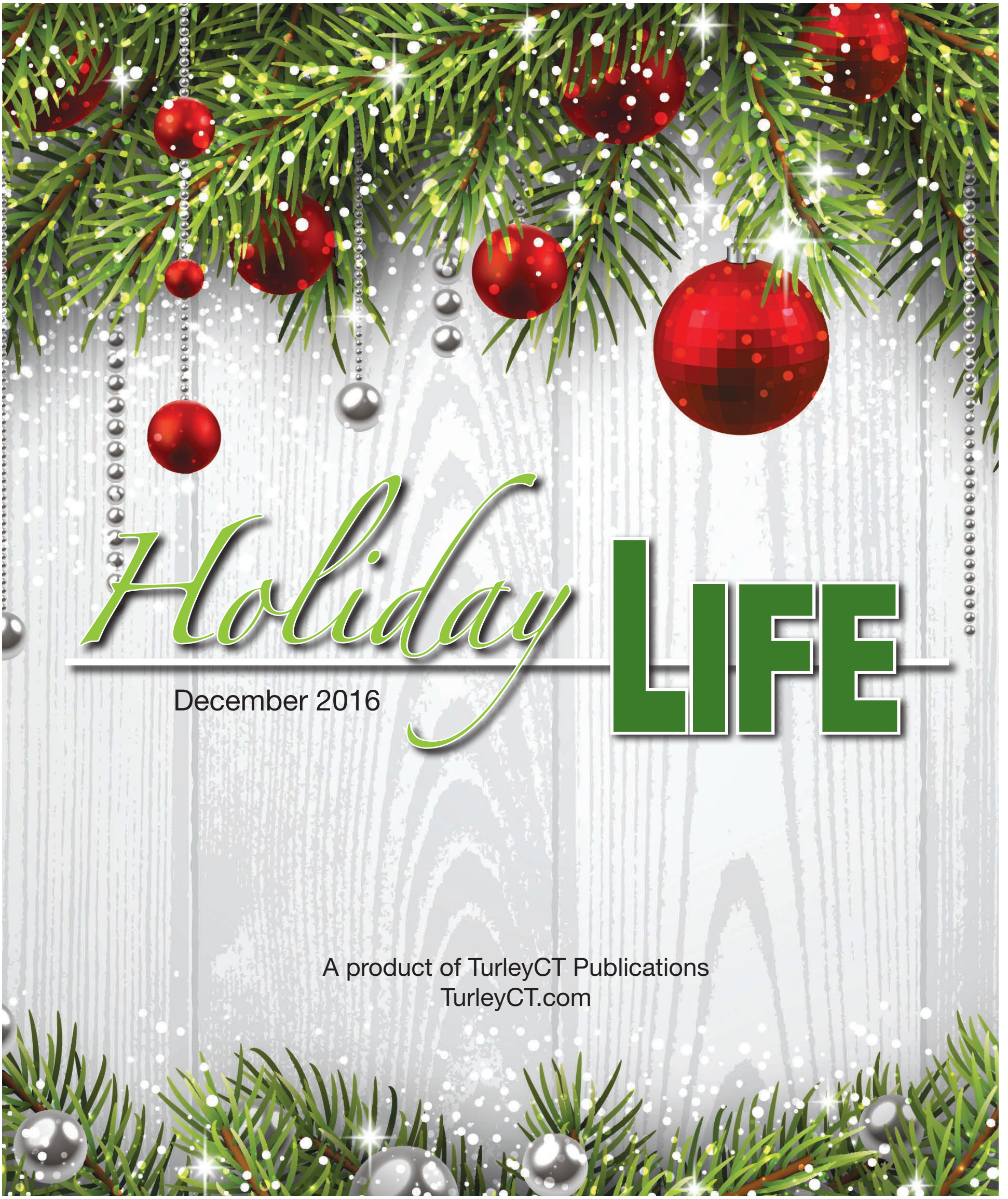
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LIFE
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Holiday LIFE

Rushing through a Winter Wonderland

How to plan for everything that needs to be done this holiday season

by Alicia B. Smith
Associate Editor

On the first day of Christmas you have gotten up at 3 a.m. for the early deals on Black Friday, on the second day of Christmas you have descended upon all the local shops you can think of for Shop Local Saturday and by the third day you are ready to call the whole thing off. Bah humbug!

The holidays are a busy time of year with parties, shopping, arguing with family, mailing cards, sending packages and feeling guilty after

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that third glass of eggnog, two slices of fruit cake and four traditional cookies that you had to eat so Aunt Trudy does not get offended.

It does not have to be that way.

With some planning ahead, the holidays can be more merry than not. Your local LIFE paper has created a list of ideas to help you stay on track and make the next few weeks as peaceful as possible.

Eats

Cooking for a crowd can be stressful and expensive. When opting for a caterer to help make your holiday party as festive and delicious as possible, there are two important, well, three, important things to keep in mind: Set a budget, consider your options ahead of time and book the caterer as soon as possible.

"A budget is definitely key," Tom Sapia, owner of Ascot Catering in Wethersfield, said.

Knowing how much you have to spend will help you prioritize your event and inform the caterer so they know exactly what your expectations are and there are no surprises.

"It's better if you have an idea," Sapia said. The caterer will then scale down the options or expand them depending on how much the host wants to spend and they can plan accordingly.

It is also advised that hosts take a look at the caterer's website or ask for a sample menu. Sapia said, too, it is good, especially if you have never used a caterer before, to talk with people who have.

"See what they do as far as planning their event, what works for them," Sapia said. "Educating yourself on using a caterer is better for you than you can understand. You can understand what the caterer is saying."

Finally, look at a calendar and call to book a date as soon as possible.

For full catering events Sapia said it is best to book two months in advance. For smaller events the deadline can be condensed, but the sooner a date is selected, the better.

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booked so you are not coming down to the wire," Sapia said. "Last minute communication is not always clear. You don't have time to think things through."

For more information call Ascot Catering at 860-529-8889 or visit ascotcatering.com.

O Christmas Tree

For many the tradition of cutting down a Christmas tree is an important holiday ritual. Timing the tree so there is time to enjoy its decorated glory and not end up with a pile of needles come Christmas Eve is a delicate balance.

To keep the tree fresh it might be best to cut your own.

Marianne Burbank oversees her family tree farm in Canton Center. This year the farm will not be open the weekend after Thanksgiving, although some years the farm does open then.

The farm will be open the first two weekends in December. The timing relates to how many trees the farm has available as they wait for younger trees to grow.

Cutting your own tree helps to keep it fresh longer. The trees at Cherry Brook Christmas Tree Farm are white spruce, which Burbank said seem to last a bit longer.

"The most important thing is to water it as soon as you can after you cut it," Burbank said. "It's helpful if you put a new slice into the bottom if there has been any time you speak of from the time you cut it until you get it into water."

Placing the tree away from a heat source is not only a safe thing to do, but also helps keep the tree from drying out.

Cherry Brook Christmas Tree Farm is located at 225 Cherry Brook Road in Canton Center. For more information call 860-693-2687 or 860-307-6753.

Cards, cards and more

When the family is finally decked in their holiday sweaters and gathered in front of the fireplace for the annual family picture for the holiday card, do not forget to snap that picture quick and get it processed.

Moto Photo in Avon processes about 50,000 holiday cards each year. Staff at the store can be as busy as Santa's Workshop.

Joel Miller, owner of Moto Photo, said this time of year is the busiest for his business. It is the time of year when they do more cards, photo books and calendars than any other time of year.

"Because we produce everything in house, we don't turn anyone away," Miller said. "But as it gets later in December, you might be best to send out Happy New Year cards."

For those ordering picture holiday cards, Miller said he presents the customer with the envelopes before the order is even processed. This enables customers to go home and get a head start on addressing envelopes, which can help save time.

Many who are interested in photo cards are waiting until Thanksgiving weekend when the entire family is likely to be home, or they like to wait until the Christmas tree is up or it's cool enough to have a fire in the fireplace. Those who want to get ahead of the rush may want to think of using a family photo that was taken during the summer as a way to get the cards made up faster.

For those who opt to stop in the store, located in Avon

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Village at 11 East Main St., in Avon, they can pick up a few gifts, too. This can be creating a calendar, printing a photo on metal or wood, creating an ornament, or even archiving old photographs or use them to create a CD or DVD of old home movies.

For more information visit avonmotophoto.com

Gift shopping, wrapping and more

It might be easy to come up with a gift idea for a friend or loved one, but the difficult task comes with finding the time to go and procure the item.

That is where Mind My Life can help. The business serves as an extra set of hands to help client's whittle down their extensive to-do list.

Stephanie Hillyard is just the person to help with holiday party grocery shopping or serve as a shopper to buy the gifts, and wrap them too.

"Oh my gosh, I absolutely love gift-wrapping," Hillyard said. "It was really a big time saver for clients I helped last year."

Hillyard said all it takes is a meeting with a client to go over the list to ensure she knows exactly what the client is looking for and then she gets busy hitting the stores giving her client time to enjoy a holiday party or work on another holiday-related task.

"For me it's a really fun opportunity to help someone out to make their life easier, it's what drives me," Hillyard said.

"I know in the end this is going to free up their time to enjoy their passions and spend more time with family."

Hillyard is also available to assist with holiday cards, helping to select the right card and preparing them to be mailed.

"I assemble everything and drop it in the mail," Hillyard said.

She can also assist with interior decorating, run errands and even help to go through closets to sort out items to donate and bring them to the appropriate collection site.

For those who may need an extra hand, er paw, to help with pets, Hillyard can help there too. It can be as simple as stopping by a client's home to let the dog out.

The one thing a client will need to think about is when to get help. Hillyard said the sooner a client calls, the more effectively she can assist.

"Sooner rather than later, definitely," she said. "So we can sit down together and figure out the best time to accomplish their to-do list. Even if it's last minute things, it's always better to call and see how we can help them."

For more information call Mind My Life

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Mailing away

Take a deep breath. Mailing packages can be a hassle, but does not have to be with a little thought.

John Hanson, owner of the UPS Store in Simsbury, assured that packages can be mailed Dec. 23, shipped overnight and arrive on the 24th. But, he also said, the sooner the package is in the mail the better. Items can get hung up because of incidental factors he and his company have no control over, such as weather systems in the Midwest. Additionally, shipping overnight increases the cost to ship, and where the package is going can impact when it arrives.

"Sending it on the 23rd, distance is a factor," Hanson said. For example, shipping a package on the 23rd to Telluride, Colorado, will not make it. "You can't even fly there yourself if you left at 6 p.m. on Friday to be there on Saturday."

Other dates to keep in mind, for regular shipping, Hanson said mailing on the 16th to get to the West Coast would be best. Other geographic issues to keep in mind, for items heading to the South, they should be shipped Dec. 19, and for those going to a semicircle in the middle of country from Chicago to Charlotte, send them no later than Dec. 20 and Dec. 22 for anything being sent regular shipping from Bangor, Maine, to Wilmington, Delaware.

Through the years, Hanson has seen a number of issues determine when packages are sent. Some have family members who like to peek, so they wait until the last possible day.

Hanson said, too, that for those sending packages through the United States Postal Service, shipping Dec. 23, for express mail, it would not make it on time.

"You should allow three days for USPS," Hanson said, adding, "You really should allow more than that."

For those who are mailing a package to a service member overseas, Hanson suggest it be shipped no later than Dec. 12.

One other thing to keep in mind, this year Hanukkah begins Dec. 24, so there might be even more items being sent out than normal because the holidays fall at the same time.

The UPS Store, 542 Hopmeadow St., will be open Sundays in December. Call 860-651-5884 or visit theupsstorelocal.com.

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Hitting the road

Many families head over the river and through the woods to spend time with family during the holidays. That alone can be stressful, but getting there does not have to be.

Cheryl Kennedy, team leader with Liberty Travel in West Hartford, advised booking holiday travel 10 months ahead of time when flight schedules have been released and travelers have more options.

"The holidays are a busy travel time, so availability for both hotels and airlines are best made well in advance," Kennedy said.

Take a deep breath. For those who waited until later in the year, there is still time to get where you want to go. It will, however, require some flexibility, Kennedy said.

"Flexibility is key with last-minute travel, on all fronts," she said.

Be open-minded when it comes to destinations, airports and flight times.

"The more flexible you are, the better the chances to find a last-minute trip," Kennedy said. "You also have to be realistic about your budget; the combination of holiday travel and last-minute arrangements add to the bottom line."

If flying is not possible, Kennedy noted there are cruise lines that leave out of New York and New Jersey that can help you get to your destination and save on airfare and travel time.

Another option might be to delay travel to the week after the New Year, a time when more deals are available especially due to it being peak season in warmer destinations.

Using a travel agent is a good option when planning a trip. Kennedy said with this time of year and the potential for inclement weather, an agent can better assist should a flight be delayed or canceled.

"Take the advice you are given by your travel consultant, including arriving at the airport plenty of time in advance," Kennedy said. "It is better to be waiting at the airport than book home because you missed your flight."

Double check, too, to ensure you have the appropriate documents and that all the necessary medications have been packed in a carry-on bag.

"Delays are inevitable so plan on them," Kennedy said. "Make sure you pack some snacks and things to keep the children busy if you are traveling with young ones."

Liberty Travel is located at 994 Farmington Ave., West Hartford. **WHL**

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Holiday LIFE

Cookie Disaster

Undercooked and overdone

Fixing holiday culinary disasters

by Mara Dresner
Staff Writer

The holidays are a time for family, friends and great food. That combination can be a cause of stress for even the most experienced of cooks. Multi-course meals for a crowd, often consisting of dishes that are only made a few times a year, are a recipe for mishaps. If you're the type of cook who tends to stay up nights worrying about the "what ifs," professionals do have a few ideas how to handle – or avoid – some of the biggest holiday cooking disasters.

If you usually cook for a handful of people and are suddenly cooking for a crowd, figuring out how much to make could be a trick. Add in the fact that your cousin never bothers to RSVP and your son might bring an extra friend and you can't not invite your co-worker who doesn't have anywhere else to go, and planning becomes even more daunting.

"To avoid not having enough food in case you have surprise visitors, we always like to plan for the unexpected," said Tom Sapia, executive chef at Ascot Catering in Wethersfield. "Prepare enough food for five to 10 people over your actual guest count. You may be left with extra food, but who doesn't love leftovers? This will ensure you have food for all to go around and leave you with peace of mind that if you do have surprise guests, they will leave your house full."

Once you've determined you have enough food, getting it to the table at the same time can be a challenge. Obviously that starts with making sure you leave yourself enough time to cook everything, which begins with thawing key ingredients, such as the turkey.

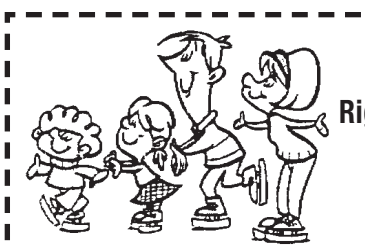
Of course, it's not unheard of for a cook to realize that it's the big day and the big bird isn't thawed in time to go in the oven.

"Place [the turkey] in a large pot with [the] chest cavity up and run cold water inside the cavity until a meat thermometer easily pierces the flesh. Drain, pat dry and dress your bird in your favorite family way. Then bake as directed," Louise Albin, president of Cafe Louise Catering with locations in West Hartford and Newington at Indian Hill Country Club, recommended. "If it will delay your meal, then make sure you have plenty of Prosecco and delicious wine and hors d'oeuvres to help pass the time in a most enjoyable way."

Matthew Jorgensen, owner/chef of Picnic Basket Catering in Cromwell, said making sure your main course is cooked is the most important aspect.

"If you're doing a Thanksgiving Day turkey and everything is done except the turkey, you have problems. Try to prepare what takes the longest and use that as your base time, so when your turkey is done, then you can start warming the squash," he said. "If we're talking about a traditional Thanksgiving Day dinner or roasts and long cook items, make sure those are done first. Let's say the turkey is done and you're waiting for the popovers or the squash to finish, then it's not as much of a disaster."

He said it's fine to be honest with your guests that one dish



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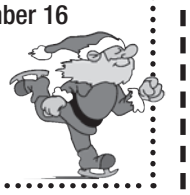

"A good plan would be to bake cookies and desserts before the holidays during a calm, stress-free time. Put some music on, have a beverage nearby, and enjoy baking a batch or two of your favorites."
– Nancy Hayden

isn't ready.

"Hopefully, you have a good group of people. You can say we can either wait [until it's ready] or go into dinner and maybe it will be done in 15 minutes. If everything is done except one thing, just go in and serve dinner. You kind of have to go with the flow," Jorgensen said.

And don't beat yourself up.

"Timing is difficult. I see people preparing meals and I feel sorry for them, because they're trying to get all of this stuff cooked and done," he noted.

He recommends cooking whatever you can a couple of days in advance if possible, especially if it's an item that will take a long time to cook. And if you end up having the sweet potatoes with marshmallows for dessert, so what?

"You have to go with the flow, laugh about it, have a drink," he advised.

Sometimes, undercooking isn't the problem. You've simply let the vegetables boil too long and now they're mushy.

If you've overcooked the veggies, Jeanne Mainville Denalsky, co-owner of Pastels Catering in Simsbury, has a tasty solution: Add cheese!

"Veggies like potatoes, broccoli or cauliflower go 'au gratin' by topping with breadcrumbs [and] adding grated cheese and butter," she suggested.

Try layering the vegetables in a baking dish, topping them with cheese and baking at 350 degrees until the cheese melts. Ovens vary, but she said it should take about seven to 10 minutes.

"Another option for overcooked veggies would be to add EVOO, sea salt and cracked pepper, and serve over pasta. Top with grated Parmesan or pecorino cheese," she said. "Or, make a vegetable soup."

With options like that, no one has to know that you were originally planning to serve the broccoli sans sauce.

Of course, some items are a little more challenging to camouflage, and here again, planning ahead can help you avoid trouble.

Nancy Hayden, the "cookie goddess" of Ginger & Pickles Cookies & Classes in Glastonbury, said that desserts can be made far in advance of the holidays.

"A good plan would be to bake cookies and desserts before the holidays during a calm, stress-free time. Put some music on, have a beverage nearby, and enjoy baking a batch or two of your favorites. Another day, bake another batch. Cookies freeze really well for up to three months, and they thaw out nicely in a few hours," she said. "Cakes are easy to make ahead. Bake the layers. When cool, wrap them in plastic wrap and freeze for up to a month."

She said that even most frostings can be made a few days ahead. Just whip them lightly before using to refresh the frosting.

Cheesecakes also freeze well, according to Hayden. Just bake, cool, wrap in plastic and freeze. Thaw them overnight in the fridge.

"One more holiday favorite, pie, can be made and frozen, uncooked! The frozen pie can be placed in the oven without thawing. It may require just a few extra minutes to cook," Hayden noted.

If it's any consolation, even the professionals sometimes goof.

"Baking is really a science. All the stars have to be aligned, from correct solids to liquids, baking temps, preheats, humidity factors etc.," noted Peggi Camosci of Tea Roses Tea Room in Cromwell. "When I tried my first hand at making French macarons, they came out pretty decent. I started researching all the techniques so I could improve my batch, but with all the fussing to improve, my next batch never rose, they just flattened. They still tasted delicious so, I sprinkled them with powdered sugar and served them as 'melted snowmen.' They were a hit."

She said that her strategy could be used beyond macarons.

"So my strategy to save my desserts consists of renaming them and sprinkling lots of powdered sugar. [It] makes most desserts look yummy," she said.

Having a sense of humor, like Camosci, definitely makes things go more smoothly. And if that doesn't work, Jorgensen from Picnic Basket Catering has a foolproof method.

"With the holidays, I find cranberry margaritas help." **WHL**

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Not-so-happy holidays

How to cope with grief when everyone else seems merry and bright

by Lynn Woike
LIFE Staff

"The holidays are just so difficult for the bereaved individual, whether that's Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas or New Year's," said Diana Duksa Kurz of Duksa Family Funeral Homes with a location in Newington. "These are times when everyone's supposed to be happy, everyone's supposed to be enjoying themselves, ... [however] some of the expectations of happiness and joy are unrealistic. Everyone's just overdoing it."

Many who are grieving feel sad, lonely and depressed and just want the holidays to be over.

"It's important to acknowledge how difficult you think it will be," said Lory Nurenberg, a social worker with Vitas Innovative Hospice Care in Glastonbury.

"Preparing in advance with specific plans and surrounding yourself with supportive people can be helpful and offset some of the feelings of emptiness. Although it is therapeutic to allow yourself some time alone to grieve, isolating yourself or canceling the holidays altogether may be counterproductive to your healing," she said.

"On the other hand, taking on more holiday responsibilities than you can emotionally handle can be equally draining and stressful. The key is to find a balance between your need for solitude and the comfort you derive from those you can share your grief and your memories with."

Kurz agreed that planning ahead can be helpful.

"Be proactive. Accept that you have limitations and decide what you do and don't want to do," she said.

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"It's never going to be the same without your loved one, so don't feel pressured to keep all the same traditions. To keep from becoming overwhelmed, consider skipping the baking, decorating the house or sending cards. Pick and choose which holiday invitations to accept.

"Lower your expectations. Don't put so much pressure on yourself," she said.

You can also develop new traditions.

"There are numerous ways to acknowledge the absence of a loved one as part of the holiday event," Nurenberg said. "Some examples include creating a memory box to share, lighting a candle, having each person at the table share a favorite memory, or giving a donation or gift in memory of your loved one."

Kurz said she knows of people who place a single flower in a vase or in a different place are other possibilities.

"It doesn't have to be big things ... but if it feels right for you, then it's important for you to do it," Kurz said. "It's going to be different. You can't think it's going to be the same as before your life changed."

Carefully consider what will work and what won't.

"Take care of yourself. If you can exercise, try to exercise. Eat a properly balanced diet – you need the strength. ... Try to get adequate rest," she said. "Take it slowly. Really take good care of yourself."

Dr. Jeanne Folks, a counselor in Avon with more than 30 years of clinical experience, suggested ways people can be kind to themselves during the holidays.

"There are two primary temptations to resist: socially isolating and forcing yourself to go out and

"It's never going to be the same without your loved one, so don't feel pressured to keep all the same traditions."

–Diana Duksa Kurz

to represent their loved one during the holidays. Offering a toast or a prayer at a holiday meal, or purchasing a gift that may have been for your loved one and then donating it to a charity that is meaningful to you were other examples she offered.

Celebrating on a different day function as if nothing is wrong.

"We do the first because we're in a lot of pain; we don't feel like seeing anyone and we, understandably, don't want reminders that our loved one isn't with us.

"The problem with the first approach, however, is that we'll miss comfort and kindness and

Resources

Holiday Remembrance Service

December 3 at 4 p.m.

Newington Memorial Funeral Home
29 Bonair Avenue, Newington

This annual non-denominational event is free of charge and includes music, the opportunity to make a decoration to hang on the tree and light refreshments. The event draws about 200 people. For more information, call 860-6666-0600.

Bereavement Support Group

Hebrew HealthCare, Main Campus
1 Abrahms Boulevard, West Hartford

Hebrew HealthCare offers a bereavement support group open to the community for those grieving the loss of a spouse or parent. It meets the second and fourth Wednesday of each month from 4:30-6 p.m. For more information, call Rabbi Daniel Braune-Friedman at 860-523-3859 or email dbraune-friedman@hebrewhealthcare.org.

Grief Support Group

Collinsville Congregational Church
7 South Street, Collinsville 860-693-6333

Churches in the Farmington Valley have begun a non-denominational grief support group for adults who are grieving the loss of a loved one. It meets each Wednesday at 10 a.m. and at 7 p.m. For more information, call the Rev. Jim Wheeler at the number above or send an email to collcong@sbcglobal.net.

Grieving Forward: Surviving the Loss of a Love

784 Farmington Avenue, West Hartford

This free group for the LGBTQ community meets the second Wednesday of each month. For more information, call the Women's Center for Psychotherapy at 860-523-4450 x51.

GriefNet.org

This Internet community of persons dealing with grief, death and major loss has more than 50 email grief support groups and two websites. There are abundant resources on specific topics for both adults and children, including an extensive book list and the ability to create a memorial.

WidowNet.org

This website provides online information and self-help resource for, and by, widows and widowers. Topics covered include grief, bereavement, recovery, and other information including how to get through the holidays.

Grieving.com

This site offers more than 30 forums for grief support, including specific groups for loss of a child, parent, sibling, pet and friend as well as forums for those grieving a miscarriage, suicide, violent death, divorce and war. One specifically deals with the holidays.

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reminders that we're not alone.

"The problem with the second approach is that we detach from our feelings, most often thinking we're protecting others. We don't want to spoil their holiday with our sadness."

Rather, Folks said, it's important to "be real, tell the truth and be gentle with yourself."

Using the analogy of a parent encouraging a child to attempt some new, difficult task, she suggested say to yourself, "I'm just going to show up at that event. If it gets to be too much, I can always leave."

You can tell your host or hostess in advance that you'll be putting in an appearance, but don't know how long you'll stay. You can also ask if there's a quiet room in their house you could go to be alone for a little while if needed.

"If you can withdraw and return to interaction at the event, you may be able to stay longer, if that's your goal," she said.

It's important to understand grief isn't linear, she said, explaining, "You may feel fine one minute, even laughing, and feel a spasm of grief the next. Part of the reason grief is so very hard is because it is so powerful and unpredictable."

Know, too, that you don't have to protect others from your grief.

"If you suddenly feel tears come, you won't ruin anything," Folks said. "It's you having the courage to keep your heart open. Make it clear to others that they don't need to do anything. There's no emergency. There's nothing to fix."

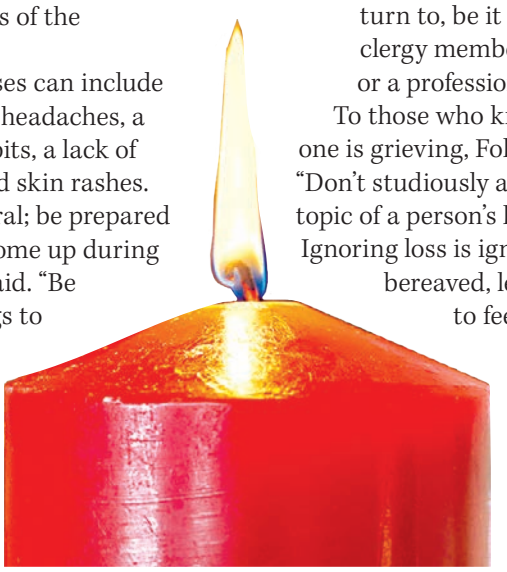
There is no right way or wrong way to grieve as you manage the best you can.

Being aware there will be physical and emotional responses to a loss, and that each is OK is important, Kurz said,

Emotional responses include sadness, disbelief, loneliness, guilt, anxiety, anger, nightmares, a lack of concentration, fear and being preoccupied with thoughts of the deceased.

Physical responses can include difficulty breathing, headaches, a change in eating habits, a lack of energy, insomnia and skin rashes.

"It's not unnatural; be prepared for these things to come up during these times," Kurz said. "Be ready for these things to be part of the person you are now, for a while at least. Accept there will be times you feel sad or depressed or anxious.



"It's also OK to feel good. A lot of people feel guilty if they find themselves enjoying an activity. It's OK to laugh, to feel good. It's your own body's way to help you relax and gain some strength, if only for a few moments. You're not being disrespectful to the memory of the person you've lost."

Kurz encourages giving yourself space to cry.

"You don't need to be strong. It's OK to cry. Crying is a wonderful outlet. ... It tends to reduce stress and calm anxiety."

She also encourages people to find someone they can turn to, be it a friend, a clergy member, a relative or a professional.

To those who know someone is grieving, Folks urges, "Don't studiously avoid the topic of a person's loss. Ignoring loss is ignoring the bereaved, leaving them to feel isolated and alone."

Noting that all grief is unique and the holidays are an especially difficult time, the Rev. Jim Wheeler of Collinsville Congregational Church said that many people may benefit from a grief support group. The faith community in the Farmington Valley has begun a weekly non-denominational group that meets each Wednesday both at 10 a.m. and again at 7 p.m. at the church at 7 South St., Collinsville.

"It's not therapy, it's grief support," he said. "You can just listen if you wish or express what you want. Most of all, the aims to have it be in a place where you can share your story and relive happy memories."

Noting there are a number of support groups throughout Central Connecticut, Kurz invited people to call the funeral home at 860-666-0600 so that information on specific programs that best suit the needs could be provided. Some are affiliated with hospitals or hospice and visiting nurse associations, some are faith based and offered through churches, and others are more focused, tending to the needs of those struggling with certain types of loss, such as suicide, drugs, cancer or the loss of a child. A selection of books or DVDs are also available from the facility's grief library, she said. **WHL**

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Holiday LIFE

The history of holiday lights

Holiday celebrants employ holiday lights in various ways. Certain individuals may be content to hang lights on their Christmas trees and call their decorating complete. Others may get their holiday jollies by making sure each square inch of their home is covered in twinkling lights. Still, other people prefer the more subdued effect of lights framing one picture window of the house.

The tradition of Christmas lights stretches back to early modern Germany when people used candles to decorate Christmas trees in Christian homes. Those candles were harbingers of what would come when electric lights replaced gas and other open flame illuminating devices that were commonplace prior to the 20th century.

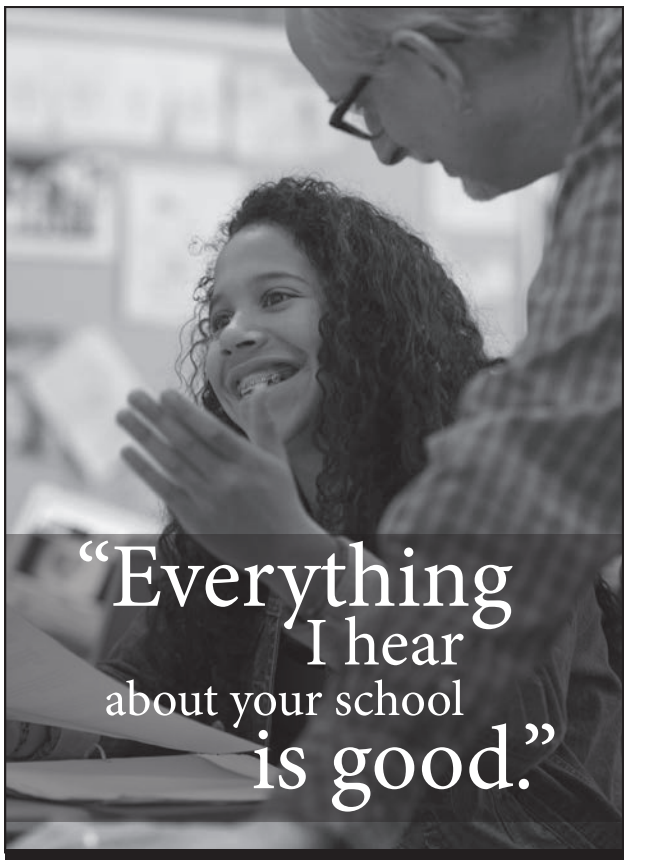
Thomas Edison, the inventor of the first successful practical light bulb, also created the first strand of electric lights that would be used in holiday decorating. By 1880, Edison had standard incandescent light bulbs well sorted out and desired a way to better advertise his invention, so he decided to make the most of the holiday season and put his light bulbs on display. According to a 2003 article in American Heritage magazine titled "The Wizard of Your Christmas Tree," Edison strung incandescent bulbs all around the compound of his Menlo Park, NJ, laboratory. Edison constructed an eight-mile underground wiring system in order to power this grand light display. Because the laboratory was situated along the railroad that passed between Manhattan and Philadelphia, thousands of people were able to see the display.

The concept of electric holiday lights took a bit of time to catch on. Edison's friend and associate Edward Johnson was tasked with stringing together colored lights in 1882 and placing them on an evergreen tree. Johnson hand-wired 80 red, white and blue light bulbs. In 1895, President Grover Cleveland requested the White House family Christmas tree be illuminated by multi-colored electric light bulbs.

In 1903, when General Electric began to offer pre-assembled kits of holiday lights, stringed lights were reserved for the wealthy and electrically savvy. For example, in 1903 a single string of electric lights cost $12, or around $300 today.

It would take several more years before holiday lights became a national tradition. On Christmas Eve 1923, President Calvin Coolidge began the country's celebration of Christmas by lighting the National Christmas Tree on the Ellipse located south of the White House with 3,000 electric lights.

Today, illuminated strands of lights have become a large part of holiday celebrations and have even been adopted for use during various year-round events. Such lights can be a beautiful and festive addition to many celebrations. **WHL**



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Sunday, Dec. 18 *10am Worship*
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Advent Lessons and Carols – December 11 at 3:00 p.m.
Christmas Pageant – December 18 at 10:30 a.m.
Christmas Eve Services of Holy Eucharist – December 24 at 4:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m.
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Christmas Day Service of Holy Eucharist – December 25 at 10:00 a.m.

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Holiday LIFE

Tis the season to ship smart

The holiday season can be hectic, and thanks to that sometimes frenetic pace, it can be easy to put things on the back burner. While it's OK to put off some things until the holiday season has come and gone, shipping gifts to loved ones does not fall into that category. Shipping can be expensive, especially for last-minute shoppers who want to ensure their gifts arrive in time for the holidays. The following are a handful of ways to ship smart and save time and money.

Ship directly to the recipient.

Last-minute shoppers who are buying online can save money by shipping gifts directly to the recipient. While shipping directly to the recipient may seem less personal than sending a gift you wrapped yourself, many online retailers allow shoppers to send gift-wrapped items directly to another person. Just be sure to have the recipient's correct address when choosing this option.

Ship early.

Waiting to ship all gifts at the same time may be more convenient, but it can prove more costly as well. If you typically finish your holiday shopping just a few days before Christmas, then waiting to ship everything will cost more money than shipping gifts as you buy them. The longer you wait to ship gifts, the more you can expect to pay if you expect those gifts to arrive on time. Shipping gifts as you buy them, especially if you get much of your shopping done early, can save you short-term or overnight shipping fees, which can be significant.

Comparison shop.

Much like you can save money by comparison shopping for holiday gifts, you can save by comparing shipping costs as well. Pack-and-ship companies compete for consumers' business during the height of the holiday shipping season, so compare the costs between the various pack-and-ship companies, including the postal service, to see which offers the best deal.

Insure the items you ship.

The holiday season is the busiest time of year for the pack-and-ship industry. While the industry is often remarkably effective at delivering gifts intact and on time, items are sometimes lost or damaged. By insuring your packages, you're ensuring you won't be out of luck should your package be lost, damaged or stolen before it reaches its destination. **WHL**

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THE VERY HUNGRY CATERPILLAR

Celebrating the holidays with music

Chorus enjoys singing the songs of the season

by Mark Jahne
LIFE Staff

There's something about holiday music that lifts the spirits and warms the heart, even on the coldest nights of December. It also brings joy to those who sing it.

The Farmington Valley Chorus of Sweet Adelines International has been rehearsing for several weeks to prepare for this special time. Christmas carols, Hanukkah songs and other seasonal selections will be featured when these women go out to sing in public.

Members come from all over central Connecticut. The chorus rehearses weekly in Palmer Hall at the First Church of Christ in Simsbury.

They look forward to the Christmas season and the opportunity to share their love of music with others. The chorus has performed at winter festivals, tree-lighting ceremonies, retirement communities and assisted living facilities. Last year's shows included caroling at the Ugly Sweater Run in Hartford.

"It's harder to sing when it's cold outside, but we still love doing it," said Nancy Propfe of New Hartford.

They also present a Christmas show at First Church every year that, like many of their other appearances, includes a sing-along. The chorus performs under the direction of Cheryl Wilcox.

Shari Kovel of Simsbury is a longtime member.

"It adds another joyful dimension to people's holiday celebrations," she said of the concerts the chorus presents. "It does as much for us as it does for them."

Kovel particularly enjoys seeing the looks on the faces of those listening to them sing.

Sometimes there are people who because of age or disability are unable to get out and bringing the music to them is a particular thrill.

"We sing for ourselves every night at rehearsal" so it's also nice to have an audience once in a while, she added. "We always sound so much better in front of an audience."

"This type of harmony, there are such pure chords in there," she said with a smile.

December is holiday time for many people and the chorus lends itself to that mood.

Kovel is Jewish and is pleased that Hanukkah songs are now part of the show. Other members standing nearby said they enjoyed learning these songs and the role they play in that winter holiday.

Pat Coffey of Southington has participated in five decades of these shows and never tires of singing Christmas music. "It's plain fun. It's something to look forward to. Next year will be my 50th year," she said. "It's all about harmony."

Coffey recalled her early days in the chorus. It started quite small, grew to 100 members, then declined. Now membership is on the rise again and more than 50 women were present for a recent rehearsal. She loves singing, especially at this time of the year.

"You get filled with joy. You're not uptight, you're relaxed, you just sing from the soul," she said.

The chorus has traveled to England, Ireland and Hawaii over the years to compete. Members enjoy having a sing-along as part of every Christmas show. In addition to the large group, quartets often go out to sing during the Christmas and Valentine seasons, for example.

The Farmington Valley Chorus of Sweet Adelines International will present its annual Christmas concert at 2 p.m. Dec. 10 at the First Church of Christ in Simsbury, 689 Hopmeadow St. The title of this year's performance is "Not Just Another Holiday Show." **WHL**

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MANAGER from page 5

face of substantial challenges, he said. State cuts to municipal aid, a looming potential increase in the Metropolitan District Commission ad valorem tax on member towns and possible bankruptcy by the city of Hartford all will impact West Hartford.

"I will be a resident taxpayer of West Hartford, so I will be interested in seeing the town well-managed," he said. "West Hartford is in a really good place right now, but this is perhaps going to be one of the most difficult years of my tenure as town manager."

Still, Van Winkle said, in this revaluation year he believes West Hartford will see a strong increase in value.

"We will look forward and produce a budget this year that is a stable long-term budget that looks at the next five years," he said. "I will leave it as good as I possibly can."

He also praised the town's new mayor, Shari Cantor, who took on the role after Slifka stepped down last spring.

"This town is in a good place with or without me. I'm really lucky to be here and to have had this opportunity to be town manager."

–Ron Van Winkle

"Scott was a great leader of this community with a lot of wisdom and legal sense," Van Winkle said. "He was a tremendous mayor to work with. Now I have a new mayor who is very intelligent with great financial understanding. She's put her heart and soul into this community. She is participating in some of these more difficult issues and [the administration] really [has] a partner there."

The feelings on the part of the two mayors are mutual.

"On a professional level, as the mayor, I could never have asked for a better partner or adviser, but on a personal level, as a friend, it would have been hard to find someone who was a better fit for me and as fascinating to work with," Slifka said.

Cantor said Van Winkle will be sorely missed.

"He's the best," she said. "It is such an honor and a privilege to work with such a smart, honorable and dedicated leader who cares so much about our community. It will be a big loss, but he will leave us in a very good place."

Van Winkle said working for West Hartford is "rewarding," as the town focuses on the goal of making the community the best it can be rather than focusing on politics.

"If you have the right attitude and abilities, this job can be a very fun and interesting one. You're going to work hard. If you don't, you're not going to be successful," he said.

In his retirement, Van Winkle looks forward to slowing down and enjoying reading the morning paper with a cup of coffee. Although he has no grandchildren yet, he hopes to in the future and, in the meantime, to take advantage of the opportunity to travel freely to see his sons who live in D.C. and on the West Coast.

In his life, Van Winkle said it all comes down to the fact that he's always been lucky.

"I've always been lucky in my life to find the right opportunities," he said. "West Hartford really stands out from all the other communities. All the seeds we've planted are going to blossom over the next few years. … This town is in a good place with or without me. I'm really lucky to be here and to have had this opportunity to be town manager." **WHL**

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The seven founding members of the first generation of Sea Tea Improv in 2009 are, from left, Greg Ludovici, Summar Elguindy, Vlad Perez, Julia Pistell, their instructor Matt Neufeld, Joe Leonardo, Kate Sidley and Dan Russell.

The increase of Improv

Area natives' devotion to art, fuel explosion of comedic theater

by Kaitlin McCallum
Assistant Editor

Developing a story with compelling dialogue and believable characters is an art. So is bringing it to life by becoming those characters and drawing the audience into the story to leave them entertained, amused or moved.

But doing it on the spot, instantly, with ideas given by an audience, well, that's improvising, the passion of a vital and growing community in Greater Hartford and the Farmington Valley.

Improvising can take many forms – musical, comedic, theatrical, dance. Here, the emphasis is on comedy and theater, a blend that makes for an always fresh, exciting, interactive form of entertainment.

"Improv theater is the art of making up stories on the spot, inspired by suggestions from the audience or other input. It's grounded in several principles, including saying yes to any reality proposed, working to make your scene partners look good, and simply trying to respond spontaneously and organically, instead of planning ahead," explained Claire Zick, a West Hartford resident and teacher at Playhouse on Park, where she runs the improv program.

"I think that improv is both comedic and theater. One of the big things about improv is you're not trying to be funny, you're trying to play real and the humor comes out of that."

– Claire Zick

While many people in the local improv community think of it as comedy, and many people are familiar with the popular show, "Whose Line Is It Anyway?" Zick says it runs a spectrum.

"I think that improv is both comedic and theater. One of the big things about improv is you're not trying to be funny, you're trying to play real and the humor comes out of that. Really high quality improv will be telling good stories and the humor comes out of that, because the audience gets that, because they're in on the joke," she said.

"Some teams might really like short form or have a shtick, almost slapstick. Some teams can do that at a really high level; other teams might have a more quiet comedy where the humor is more patient, more subtle, the humorous aspects are more drawn out and there's everything in between. There are kind of realistic shows, maybe narrative-based, to things that might be very physical and absurd and zany."

Here, in Greater Hartford, what improv looks like is usually a group of teammates who

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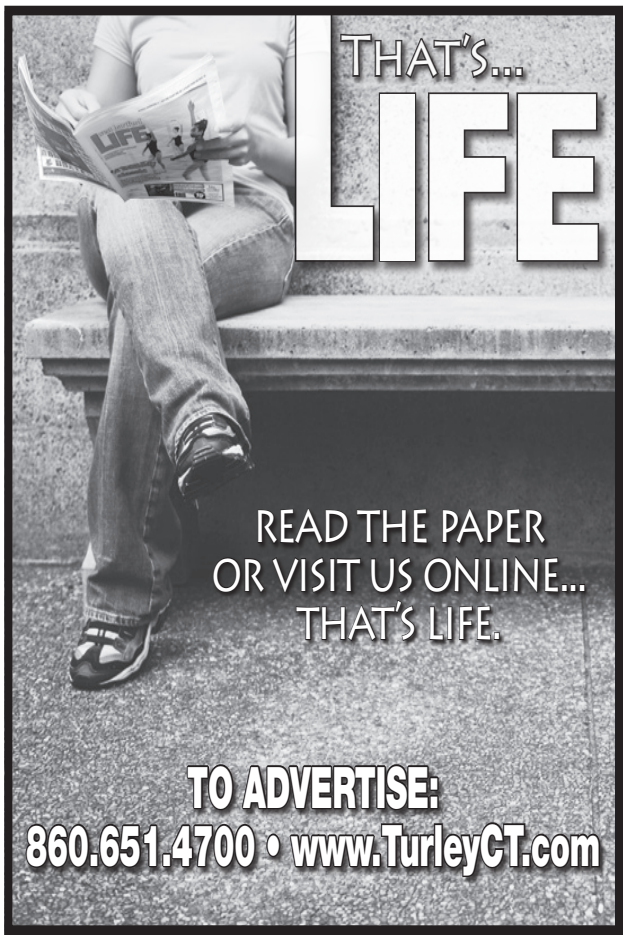

The fourth generation of Sea Tea Improv gathers in 2015.

invent and act out stories before an audience. There are several main venues – Playhouse on Park, Carriage House, Hole in the Wall Theater, Hartford Stage and recently, the dedicated Sea Tea Comedy Theater – along with dozens of smaller clubs and cafes.

A few of those venues have house teams, ensembles that practice and perform together and give regular shows. There also is a collaborative spirit in the improv community, allowing performers to join other teams for shows and larger productions. Zick is currently working on a long form improvisation of "A Christmas Carol" and Sea Tea Improv is staging a Willy Wonka Sketch Show.

Zick praises the local scene, saying the area is now home to a whole range of styles and types of improv, a rich community and a wealth of performing opportunities.

It was not always so.

When Zick moved to Connecticut 11 years ago, she came from a thriving improv community and was a member of the ensemble at Unexpected Productions, a prominent Seattle company.

"When I moved out here, there was very little in the way of improv. There were a couple groups here and there that occasionally performed. There wasn't a cohesive scene, not a lot going on and what was going on was short form oriented, very game oriented," she said.

Out of necessity, Zick did what she could. She approached the artistic director of Park Road Playhouse (now Playhouse on Park) about starting a program teaching and performing.

"I started doing that with the hopes of helping to build a base of improvisers who could also perform in shows," she said.

In addition to teaching classes, Zick started CT Cage Match as a performance venue for teams and people she had taught.

"That was one of the first regular performance opportunities that began here. ... It gave people a performance outlet," she said.

Then Sea Tea Improv took off.

It started with seven friends, local improvisers, who met through classes at Hartford Stage and had little in common but their love of improv.

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"We were all young 20-some-things who wanted different things out of our futures, but we all saw an opportunity in achieving that through comedy and improv comedy in particular. ...

"After we took all the classes we could take twice, we decided we really wanted to take it to the next level in performing. We were hanging out at Hartford Stage after class and noticed that the comedy club was dark. It was vacant on Sunday ... and we asked if we could do a show there," explained Greg Ludovici, one of the founding members and the artistic director of Sea Tea Comedy Theater.

The group set out on a trial and managed to sell out the club at Hartford's City Steam Brewery, drawing more than 170 people. Around the same time, the improv teacher at Hartford Stage took a job in another state and recommended the group take over teaching. They did that and more. The group began traveling to New York City to train at the Upright Citizens Brigade Improvisational and Sketch Comedy Training Center – the country's only accredited improv training center.

Sea Tea's founding members graduated from the training center, taught classes at Hartford Stage and began to study different types of long form improv, an alternative type from the game-type short form popularized by the television show "Whose Line Is It Anyway?"

"Our M.O. has always been to find an empty space in Hartford and fill it with art, fill it with people, fill it with laughter; so since we had studied the long form improv for a few years, we decided we were ready to start showing it to Connecticut," said Ludovici, who grew up in Simsbury.

"We were at the Firebox Restaurant watching a friend's band play and realized that the studio across the hall was dark, so we approached them and said, 'Your beautiful space is empty Friday nights. Can we bring a show here one Friday night a month?' So we worked out a way to rent out the space and perform long form, bringing groups in from Boston, New York, Vermont just to introduce it."

Sea Tea Comedy Theater prepares for "A(n) Improvised Christmas Carol," which runs December 8-18.

Courtesy photo

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Sea Tea Comedy Theater's new space in Hartford opened at 15 Asylum Street in August.

Courtesy photo

At the same time, Sea Tea Improv was performing two monthly shows, teaching classes and going to birthday parties, fundraisers, graduations and giving corporate workshops on teambuilding. It began to tailor curriculums to individual groups, like divorce lawyers or social workers, recognizing the principles improvisation is built on can profoundly empower people to communicate and succeed.

"We started offering classes regularly to fuel the development of more performers, who would form into teams, who could put on shows, so then we knew we wanted to build a theater. It was just a matter of time and saving up money," Ludovici said.

They started work on plans in 2010, got a Kickstarter, a loan and found another dark space in Hartford, a bar that had been vacant for almost 20 years.

Sea Tea Comedy Theater, at 15 Asylum Street, opened in August of this year.

Now, two shows are offered Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, with special events also ongoing. Sea Tea teaches classes, workshops and corporate training sessions, and offers its space to other artists. Sea Tea Improv includes a pool of more than 60 talented actors and comedians, making up 24 teams and related performers. It also hosts the annual Hartford Improv Festival, which draws performers from all over the country.

Zick and Ludovici both say Hartford has blossomed into an incredibly rich destination both to see and to learn improv.

"We have really, really talented friends here and we wanted to build something that would train people up and give them the stage time and opportunities that our friends in New York can't get because there are too many people. So we are giving really talented people who are stars before they're stars the chance to shine. And we're showing Hartford you don't need to go to New York to find really high-quality comedy. We went there, we studied it and we brought it back," Ludovici said.

Kristen Parker grew up in Simsbury, now lives in West Hartford and teaches theater at Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts Middle School. She is a newer member of the Sea Tea Improv Touring Group but got her first taste of improv as a student at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts and continued in college. She said the community of improvisers here has its own advantages over New York.

"They're such a friendly, awesome group. It was so different from what I had experienced. I had done some improv in New York and you can feel like you're just kind of a number and it's a lot of people to look up to. You don't feel like you have too much of a voice. But since I started a year ago, they let me do so many crazy things. They trust their students. If you pitch anything to them, they're going to make it work," Parker said.

Those are two of improv's powerful principals – always say yes and make your teammates look like geniuses.

"For me personally, I have always been a planner and I try to think ahead and it's difficult for me in my everyday life to really be focused and in the moment. So for me, improv is one of the few places I really do that. ... It's like this great way to engage my whole being and force myself to be present and focused," Zick said.

Courtesy photo

Laura Manasewich, Greg Ludovici, Bryan Thurston, Claire Zick, Matt Saccullo, and Kevin MacDermott prepare for "A(n) Improvised Christmas Carol" at Sea Tea Comedy Theater.

"One of the things I do love about it is I am a recovering perfectionist. Even when I try to write comedy I feel like it could always be better. I could always work on it a little bit longer. But improv told me to let go. You can't go back and edit the words that just came out of your mouth. You can't change what you've just said. ... In improv, there are no mistakes, only gifts, because everything you said is going to be accepted as truth. You have partners who are supportive and who are going to make it a success and make it something that's fun and beautiful," Zick said.

"It is collaborative – collaborative with the audience and we as individuals create it together and because we're working as a team, it is going to be better than we ever thought it could be.

"Sea Tea deserves a lot of credit here. They were a group of seven people who really fell in love with improv and were devoted to being the best they can and growing as much as possible. They really expanded what is available. It's really exploded. It's awesome." **WHL**

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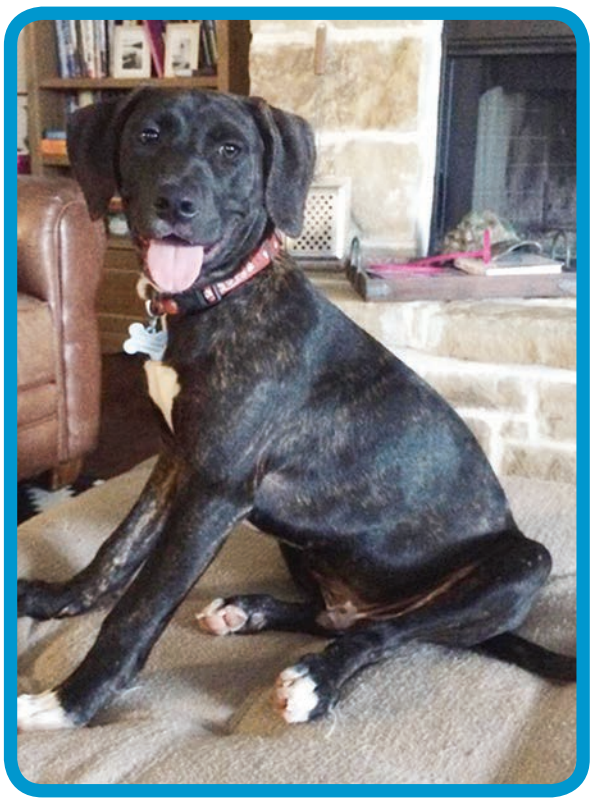

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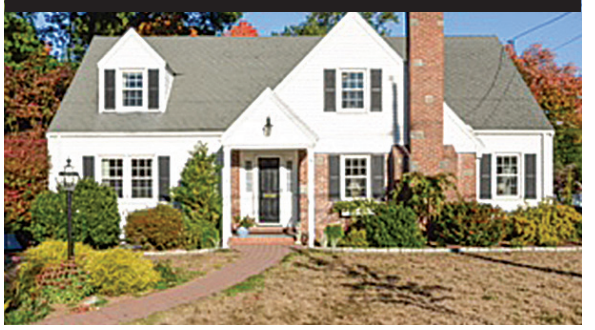

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Writer's block

Hold the phone

by Lynn Woike
Editor

I'm old enough to remember when an apple was a fruit and not a technology company, when chalkboards were green and you erased them with a square felt duster, and when clouds were visible masses of condensed water vapor floating in the atmosphere and not computer processing resources in cyberspace.

Technology has changed a lot in my lifetime.

I grew up with a mono record player that had three speeds: 78, 45 and 33; and a transistor radio played up only AM stations. Our first television was a little screen in a huge cabinet; it had rabbit ear antenna to which we added tin foil, required warming up and got three channels that went off the air at 11 p.m. after playing the National Anthem as a flag waved in the wind, and announcing "This concludes our broadcasting day," followed by a test pattern and then static.

I am quite happy to be low on the tech totem pole.

I have never owned an electric can opener, I no longer own a microwave, and wouldn't think of buying an electric alarm clock that wakes you up with a hot cup of tea or one of those hot dog cookers. I actually enjoy washing dishes by hand and have not moved to replace my dishwasher when it died early this year.

While I have managed to stay only a few years behind computer technology, phones are another story. Those from my youth had a cord that attached them to the wall and another cord that attached to the handset. While I no longer have a landline, my cell phone is old enough not to be smarter than I am.

It can manage text and voice messages, but has no access to Internet, Facebook or emails. The photos it takes are nothing more than postage stamps. It has no apps, but it does have a handful of tools; the only ones I've used are the notepad and the alarm clock.

If I had a smartphone, it could wake me up to music or a variety of sounds. It could also function as a stopwatch or a timer.

Smart phones have taken the place of cameras. They can recognize smiles and faces, add geotags, edit, sort and even apply filters and special effects. They also function as camcorders that can shoot movies. Every one taken can be saved because phones come with 120GB of storage. To put that in perspective, consider that the computer used to guide men 331,210 miles to the moon and then back had 64K of memory – smaller than many SIM cards. NASA's early computers had 3GB.

You don't need a calculator if you have a smartphone; you'll also never have to figure out how much to leave for a tip.

Today's phones are also calendars and datebooks that can automatically coordinate with other people's datebooks, and give reminders for appointments and meetings.

With a smartphone, you no longer need a GPS to get you where you want to go. Cellphones will give you live traffic updates and satellite views of just about any place on earth, in addition to accessing live webcams from the giant panda habitat to the Pantheon, a Las Vegas wedding chapel and Niagara Falls.

You can deposit checks with a smartphone, flash coupons while checking out and pay for purchases using an image of your credit card.

With a smartphone, you no longer need a television or a DVD player to watch movies, shows or sporting events. Books and eReaders have also been replaced by smartphones.

They are the modern version of transistor radios – now with front-facing stereo speakers and mega volume levels – able to play any music you record, buy or stream.

One of their most popular uses is to play games. I grew up with board games and never played Nintendo, so I can't imagine getting a smartphone so I can play Angry Crows or Plants vs. Zombies.

I don't have appliances that need to be turned on or off remotely, nor do I have shades that need to be adjusted when I'm not there, but smartphones can do that, too.

Apps and add-ons allow them to do just about everything except the dishes, and with one, you can almost get by without a computer all together.

That my phone is little more than a phone has been just fine until now. I haven't needed – or wanted – to be reached every hour of every day, nor did I want to be tracked. I haven't had a desire to talk to Siri or have her talk to me. While there's something heady about being able to hold the world in my palm, I have always thought a smartphone would be distracting and addicting more than it would be necessary. I also don't want to walk out of the store with a piece of technology I'm not smart enough to use, knowing it will be obsolete before I get it home.

But I'm weakening. I'm tired of the looks I get when I whip out my little six-year-old phone. It might be nice to have a phone smart enough not to let me call someone I'm mad at, and to realize when it's lost and call to me from the bookcase or behind the couch pillows before I even realize it's missing. **WHL**

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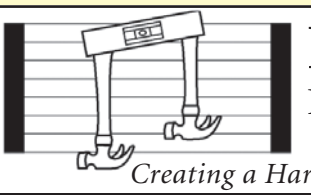

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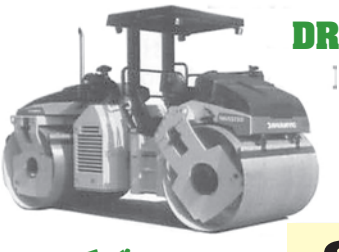

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BY MARK DIXON
WFSB METEOROLOGIST [AMS]

Winter storm names...

If you've lived in Connecticut long enough, you'll remember Blizzard Larry, the Blizzard of '78. Or, perhaps the big ice storm of December 1973 named Felix. More recently, we had to deal with Storm Alfred in late October of 2011 when heavy, wet snow caused a record power outage in Connecticut. And, it was Blizzard Charlotte that dumped up to 40" of snow on the state in 2013. Yes, people remember names, especially the ones that have been attached to Connecticut's biggest winter storms.

Naming winter storms is something unique to WFSB and dates back to the days of the Travelers Weather Service in 1971, with a team of meteorologists broadcasting weather information on Channel 3 and other media outlets. It's a tradition our station is proud to carry on here in the state of Connecticut – now 45 years later!

In order for a storm to get a name, it has to meet certain criteria: we must expect at least 6" of snow for much of the state, and/or ½" of ice accretion (that would be a significant ice storm).

When it comes to the list of names, we like a good theme – previously we've done "current day chart toppers" ...and "former First Ladies" ...this year, we're going with notable sports figures with ties to Connecticut. **WHL**

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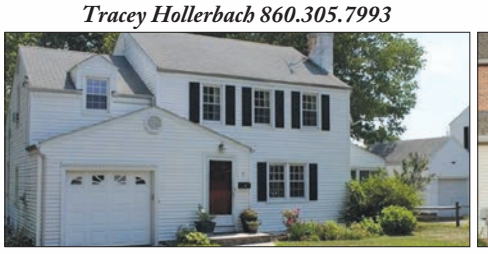

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